

Der Werwolf

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Hyougetsu
ill. Nari Teshima

Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight

— The Black Werewolf Princess
and the Desert's Memories —



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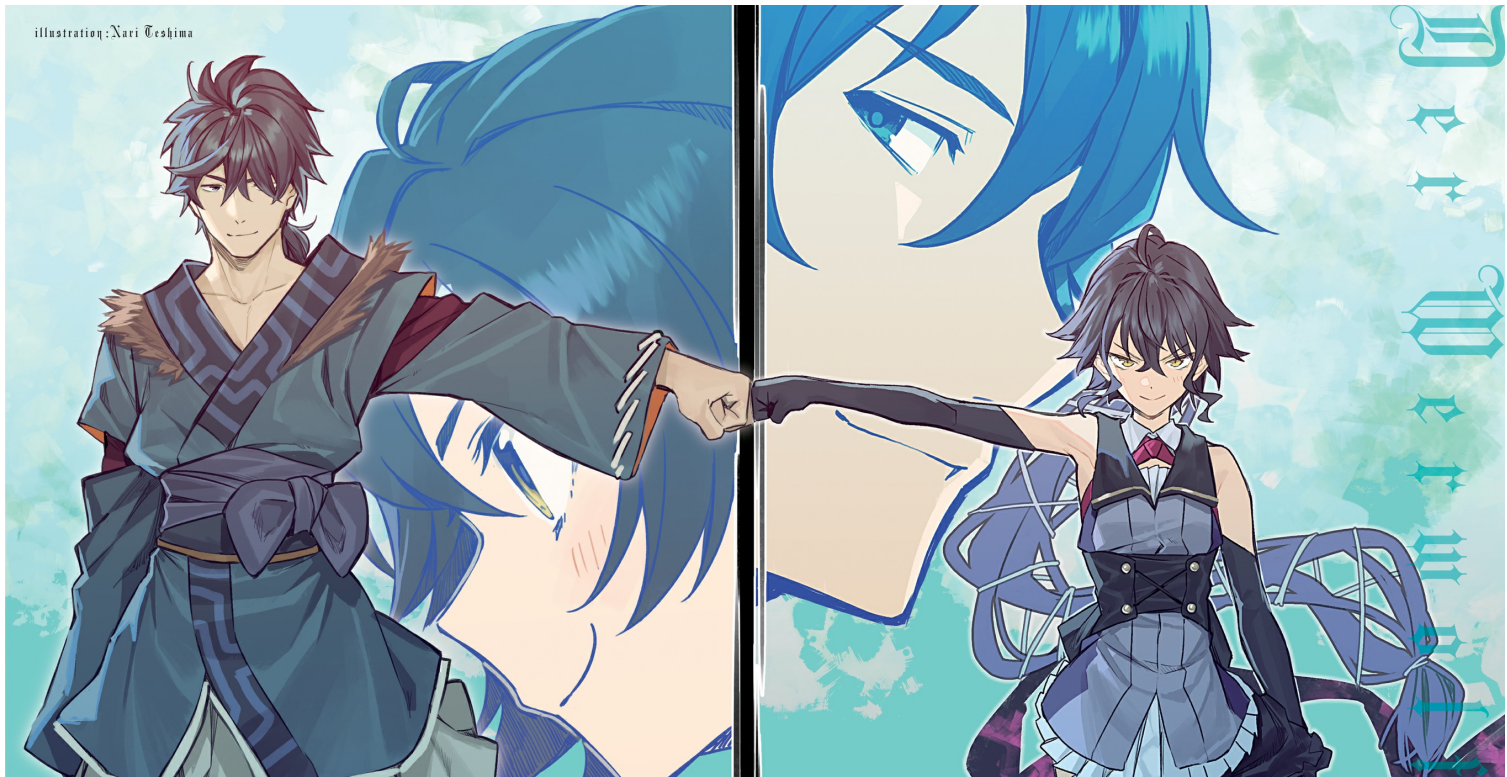
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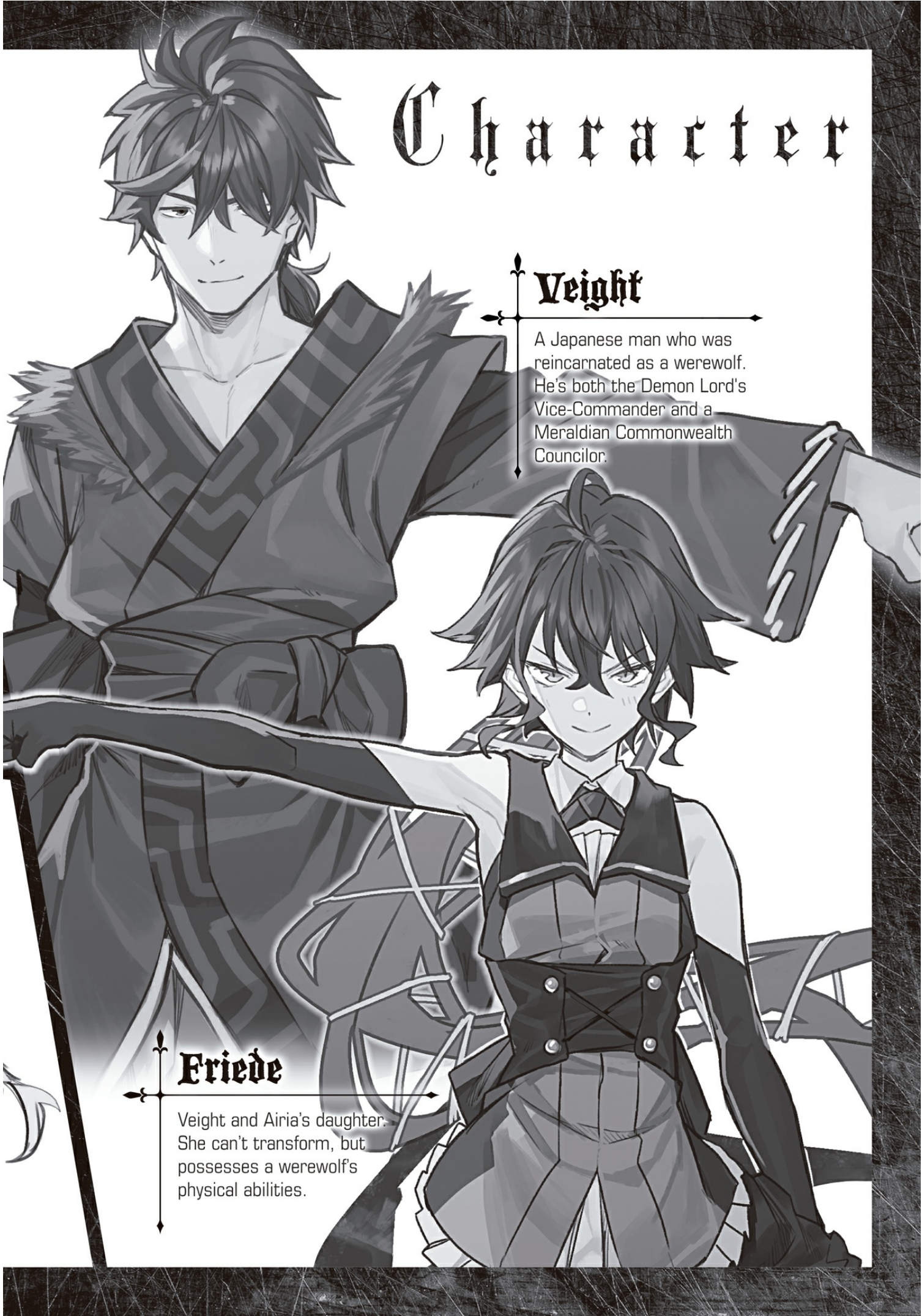
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Character

Veight

A Japanese man who was reincarnated as a werewolf. He's both the Demon Lord's Vice-Commander and a Meraldian Commonwealth Councilor.

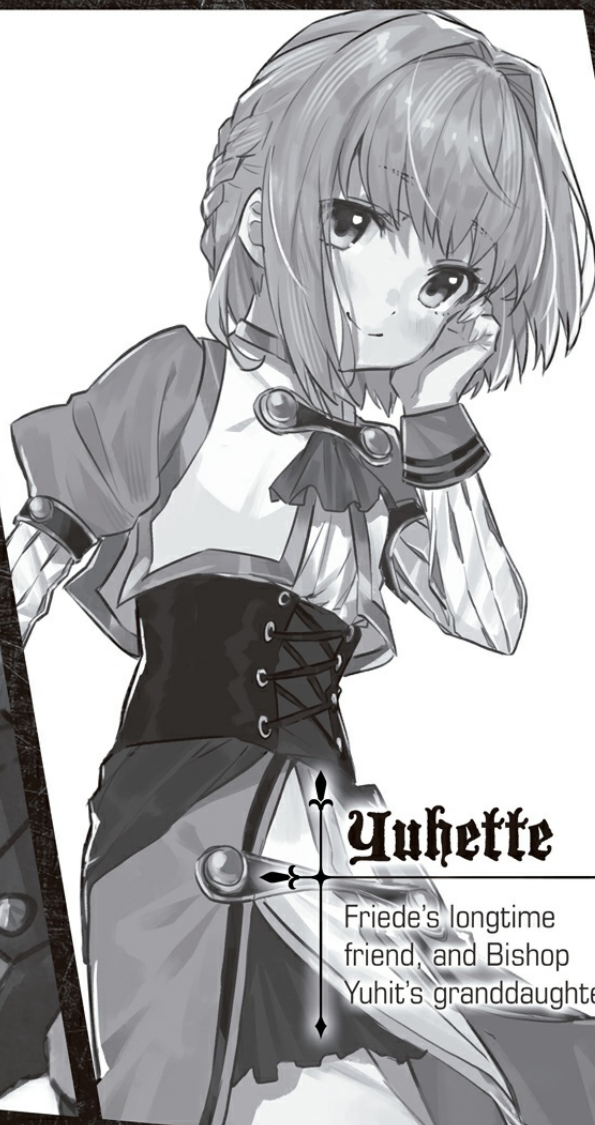
Friede

Veight and Airia's daughter. She can't transform, but possesses a werewolf's physical abilities.



Shirin

Friede's longtime friend, and Baltze and Shure's son.



Yuhette

Friede's longtime friend, and Bishop Yuhit's granddaughter.



Eleora

Rolmund's Empress, and an old friend of Veight's.



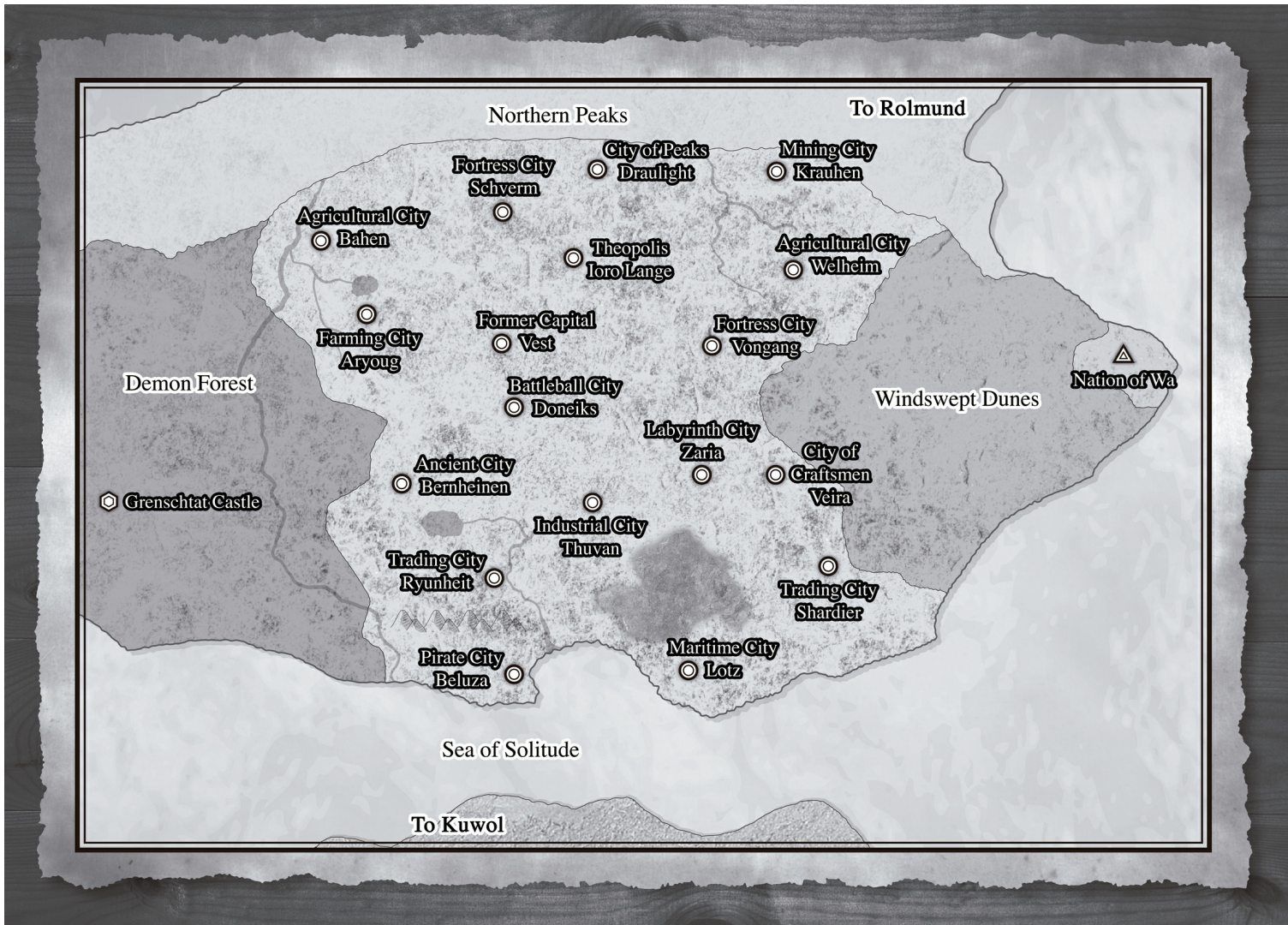
Michal

Eleora's niece, and one of Friede's best friends. They don't get to see each other often, but stay in constant contact by exchanging letters.



Airia

The demon army's third Demon Lord, and Veight's wife.



— *The Story So Far* —

Thanks to the efforts of the Black Werewolf King, Veight, and the Demon Lord, Airia, Meraldia has managed to retain friendly relationships with Kuwol, Wa, and Rolmund.

Veight and Airia's daughter, Friede—having recently graduated from the elementary division of Meraldia's university—was granted permission to attend a study abroad trip to Rolmund. While there, she became fast friends with Empress Eleora's niece, Micha, and learned a great deal about Rolmund and her father's impact on the nation's history. However, it wasn't all fun and games...

One day, when Friede and Micha were sneaking out of the castle to visit sweet shops in the city, Micha was kidnapped by a group of rebels who aimed to drag Eleora off her throne. Friede tailed the kidnappers to their hideout, but due to the rebels' elaborate plot, she was left without any backup. Unwilling to wait around, Friede charged into the hideout alone and successfully rescued Micha.

Much like her father before her, Friede was later given a lecture about not charging into enemy territory alone—but Eleora also thanked her profusely for saving her niece's life. Friede's bright disposition, forthright nature, and immense bravery left a lasting impression on the nobility of Rolmund.

The story so far

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Chapter 14

Since we sent our last delegation to Rolmund, Meraldia's relations with them had improved significantly.

"I didn't think Friede would accomplish so much," I said to Airia while sipping on my tea. The two of us were taking a small break from the day's work. "To think she managed to rescue Princess Micha all on her own. She keeps exceeding my expectations at every turn. Sure, sometimes she acts reckless, but she always pulls through in the end. It'd be a lie if I said I wasn't worried about her, but she's grown into quite the capable young woman."

Airia smiled and replied, "She takes after you, so I'm not surprised that she runs headfirst into danger."

"Am I really that reckless?" In my case, I was just worried about not living up to the expectations people had of me, so I pushed myself as hard as I could. Honestly, it was exhausting. "I want Friede to be able to live her own life. There's no need for her to work so hard—I'd rather she enjoy herself a little bit more."

"I agree, but I'm afraid circumstances won't allow her to," Airia said in a worried voice. In truth, I shared her worries.

"Come to think of it, Fumino said she had official business to discuss, didn't she?"

"It's rare for her to come to us in the capacity of her official title. Most of the time she just comes for a 'casual' visit and tells us what she needs done." Airia chuckled.

I smiled. "Yeah, she purposely makes her visits private so that if anything were to go wrong, she'll be the only one held responsible. The people of Wa are so insistent on personal responsibility."

With how many Japanese people had influenced Wa throughout the centuries, Wa's culture had ended up resembling Japan's—in both the good

parts and the bad.

Airia gave me a thoughtful look and said, “Which means, if she’s actually coming to visit in an official capacity, then this must be serious.”

“Yeah...”

I had a bad feeling about the meeting to come.

My premonition turned out to be right on the money.

“Demon Lord Airia, Vice-Commander Veight. I am deeply grateful that you took time out of your busy schedules to meet with me.”

Fumino was fully outfitted in ceremonial dress and bowed deeply as she spoke. I bowed in return, but it felt strange hearing formal speech out of her, since she normally treated us like close friends. Airia simply nodded her head in return, as was befitting the leader of a nation.

“It is an honor to receive you in my court. Though I have known you for a long time, you have rarely ever visited in an official capacity.”

Airia gently pushed Fumino to get to the point, and she gave Airia a wan smile.

“Yes, I believed a matter of such import would be best discussed in a formal meeting.”

How important does something have to be for Fumino of all people to take it seriously?

Skipping past the rest of the formalities, Fumino said, “When I told the Chrysanthemum Court that you had sent goodwill ambassadors to Rolmund, they were quite intrigued.”

“Ah, so that’s why you’re here.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I realized what Fumino had come for. Initially, I’d been worried that she might ask for military or economic aid, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. I waited quietly for Fumino to elaborate.

“The Chrysanthemum Court, too, wishes to host a technological exchange to

deepen the ties between our two countries. We would like to invite Meraldia's students to come visit our country of Wa."

"You want our students specifically?" Airia asked, and Fumino nodded.

"Yes. However, due to Wa being further from Meraldia than Rolmund we would like a large—or at least, as large as possible—delegation to be arranged to visit."

I didn't even have to analyze Fumino's scent to tell what she was up to. She knew she was being obvious too, and looked shamelessly up at us. From the start she'd known she couldn't hide her true intentions. And so, I decided to cut to the chase.

"The Chrysanthemum Court wants to meet Friede, don't they?"

"Ahaha..." Fumino laughed awkwardly.

That was all the confirmation I needed. I didn't mind sending Friede on another field trip, but there was one thing I needed to make clear.

"I have no problem with sending a delegation, but ultimately it's up to Friede whether or not she wants to go."

"But of course."

Fumino already knew that Friede and her friends would relish the opportunity to visit Wa—Shirin especially. The young man was obsessed with Wa culture. The members of the Chrysanthemum Court had done a good job of inundating him with the wonders of Wa. In retrospect, they'd probably done it so that when a time like this came, they wouldn't have to worry about him saying no. Their foresight was terrifying.

"You already know they'll say yes, don't you?" I asked with a slight frown.

"I would make for a poor negotiator if I did not."

She really planned this out well. Of course, all Airia or I had to do was say no, and that would be the end of that. But the Chrysanthemum Court also knew we wouldn't refuse them. Most of their proposals were mutually beneficial to both Meraldia and Wa, and this was no different. Besides, they usually threw in a nice little bonus whenever they made a request. Sometimes I could squeeze a

little more out of them, but they were crafty negotiators so it wasn't easy.

Airia gave me a big smile—her way of signaling that today's negotiations were now entirely up to me. I didn't mind, but there was one thing I needed to get out of the way ahead of time.

"For the record, we'll be sending these students to Wa as part of their education; they won't be official diplomats. Diplomacy is important, of course, but the primary purpose of this trip is for Meraldia and Wa's younger generation to get to know each other better. Will that be acceptable?"

"It will be most acceptable. We, too, want Meraldia's students to feel welcome in our country."

Fumino gave me a small smile. I could tell that wasn't quite what she wanted, but since she'd agreed that was enough for me. *Maybe I can get away with asking for some bigger concessions then.*

"Our Demon Empress is quite interested in your culture and its ancient ruins as well. Would you be willing to let her and her disciples investigate the Great Torii of the Divine?" I asked with a smile, and Fumino awkwardly scratched her cheek.

"Th-That is...not something I have the authority to approve..."

"The Demon Empress is also Meraldia University's principal, and our greatest scholar. She would be the perfect person to send on a technological exchange, don't you think?"

"W-Well...err, you do have a point, but..."

Perfect, it's working. The Chrysanthemum Court knew I'd been reincarnated. The Great Torii of the Divine had brought reincarnated souls and even whole people to this world from other realms. Until it had broken down, it had brought Wa many talented people from my world. For generations, it had been Wa's lifeline, and it was such a rare artifact that not even Master had seen something like it before.

Of course, the Chrysanthemum Court kept the information on the Torii top secret, even in its defunct state. They likely didn't want someone from another country investigating it. For a long time I'd respected their wishes, but I really

did want to know more about it. It was the only portal I knew of that connected to other worlds. Naturally, Master was dying to examine it as well.

Hesitantly, Fumino asked, “Are you sure...she’s just going to look at it, Veight?”

“Even she wouldn’t try to take it home. Until now, I’ve respected your history and culture. Surely you can trust me on this, right?”

“I can, but...”

Fumino still looked unwilling to say yes. From her scent I could tell she wanted me to wonder whether or not I’d pushed her too far. Of course she was still a little troubled by the request, but not nearly as much as she was pretending to be. *Fine, I’ll give you a few concessions.*

“In return, I’ll ask the Demon Empress to assist in your investigation of the Windswept Dunes. I’m sure it will go much faster with the continent’s wisest scholar helping out.”

Neither storms nor desert monsters could harm Master. After all, she could fly.

Fumino thoughtfully mulled over my proposal. “That would certainly be a huge help. I’ll ask the Chrysanthemum Court for permission to let her examine the Torii.”

Airia turned to me and asked, “Are you sure it’s all right to volunteer the Demon Empress for this job without asking her?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll convince her, Airia. In the meantime, you should make sure all of the students really are interested in going.” I turned back to Fumino and added, “Fumino, at the end of the day, Meraldia still puts the wishes of our people before the needs of the nation. If for whatever reason Friede doesn’t want to go, please don’t push the issue.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t want to force her into doing anything.”

Fumino seemed certain there was no way Friede would say no, and honestly, I didn’t blame her.

“Don’t worry. Knowing her, she’ll say yes without a second thought.”

I wouldn't be able to stop her even if I wanted to.

When I went home and asked Friede if she wanted to go to Wa, I got the expected response.

"Oh yes, absolutely! I wanna go to Wa!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Wa's the country that's just like your home country in your past life, right?!"

"Sort of... A lot of reincarnators from Japan helped build their nation up, so it does share a lot of similarities."

"That's so cool! When are we going?! Next month?!"

The fact that she asked next month instead of tomorrow showed that she'd grown, at least a little. Her trip to Rolmund had probably taught her that expeditions like these took time to prepare.

I gathered up my documents and gave her a small smile.

"It'll take a little bit longer than that, I think. We still need to finish negotiations, and then make sure everyone invited actually wants to go. There's a lot to square away before we can even start making travel plans."

I couldn't afford to make any mistakes in big negotiations like this one. It was my job to make sure Wa looked after the safety of our students while they were there. There was no telling what might happen in Wa either, so it was best to leave extra room in the schedule, and send doubles of every letter in case one messenger met any unfortunate accidents.

God, there's way too much to do, I thought while closing my eyes.

"What's wrong, dad?"

"Just...thinking about how much work I'll need to do to organize this trip," I replied.

I wish I could go myself. But since I couldn't, I could at least let Friede know what to be on the lookout for.

"The Chrysanthemum Court most likely wants to size you and your friends up."

“What for?” Friede gave me a puzzled look.

“Personally, I think you should be free to choose whatever path you want in life, but everyone else expects that you’ll follow in my footsteps. They think you’ll join the upper echelons of the Commonwealth Council or the demon army.”

“Ooh... Yeah, I have been thinking about where I want to work in the future, but I’m still not sure.”

Fortunately, there was no rush, so she could take her time deciding.

I laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “Don’t worry. You should choose what you want, for your own sake. Don’t pay attention to what others expect from you.”

“But is that really okay?”

“Absolutely. The only correct path in life is one you’ve made for yourself.”

Some people could find fulfillment in following a path laid out for them by someone else, but Friede definitely wasn’t one of them. I knew she would come to regret it if she didn’t choose her own future.

“Anyway, I know it’ll be a hassle, but would you mind showing the people of Wa how awesome Meraldia’s students are? It’ll make everyone else happy if you can.”

“Sure.” Friede nodded immediately.

She’d agree to almost anything if it meant she got to visit Wa. I was beginning to realize that she was at her best when she was in a good mood. *Then again, that’s true of pretty much every kid, isn’t it? Heck, it might just be true of every person.*

“Good, good.”

It felt like I’d learned more about humans after becoming a werewolf than when I’d been human. This, too, was all thanks to Master, Airia, Friede, and Friedensrichter.

“You’re grinning at nothing again, dad.”

“I’m just thinking about how fun life is, that’s all.”

“Oh, I totally get that! I’m having so much fun all the time!” Friede pumped a fist into the air.

Her mental fortitude was insane. Despite how young she was, she was already so reliable.

“I’ll be counting on you then, Friede. Master will come with you at least partway, so if you need anything, just ask her.”

“Wait, she will?”

“Our investigation of the Windswept Dunes is still unfinished, so she’s going to help with that first. I’m sending a few werewolves to guard her, don’t worry.”

They’d be able to guard Friede as well for the most dangerous stretch of the journey, so it was two birds with one stone.

“What about you, dad?”

“I’ll be sitting this trip out. With Master gone, some of the demons might start thinking they can do whatever they want again. I’m staying here to make sure they stay in line.”

Many demons still looked down on humans and saw them as nothing more than ants—especially members of some of the stronger demon races like kentauros and werewolves. If I didn’t keep them on a tight leash, they might spark another war between humans and demons. To make matters worse, they only followed those they considered stronger than themselves, and I was one of the few who could beat them all single-handedly. *I can’t wait until the next generation takes over so I can retire...*

That night, after Friede had gone to bed, I got an unusual visitor.

“Good evening, Veight.”

“It’s rare to see you come to me, Mao. Are you finally willing to go to jail for your crimes?”

I pulled out a chair for him, and he gave me a wry smile as he sat down.

“If just a little bribery was enough to land someone in jail, the entirety of Ryunheit’s Merchant Guild would have been arrested by now. No—I came here because I have something important to tell you.” The influential people of this world had very little respect for authority or rules, so Mao was hardly unique in his disregard for the law.

Frowning, I took a bottle of wine and a pair of glasses from a canine maid who’d come waddling over.

“Thank you, you’re free to retire for the rest of the night.”

“Thank you, master. Good night.” Wagging her tail, the Aindorf family’s newest maid bowed to me and left the room.

I poured a glass of amber wine for each of us and asked, “So, what did you want to tell me?”

“The Chrysanthemum Court’s true intentions.” He took a sip of his drink and adjusted his glasses. “I imagine you’re already aware that there’s more than meets the eye to their latest request.”

“Yeah... Wait, how do you know about that?”

With a completely straight face, Mao replied, “I bribed someone.”

“Seriously?”

I couldn’t believe Mao had managed to bribe even Wa’s diplomats. The man was a monster. *At least he’s on my side.*

“I know that the Chrysanthemum Court wants to appraise Meraldia’s students and compare them to their own,” I said.

“More specifically, they want to appraise Friede.” Mao sighed. “It’s truly deplorable how underhanded they’re being.”

Don’t you give me that sigh; you do the exact same thing. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. I gave Mao an exasperated look, and he grinned at me.

“Have you realized anything else?” he asked.

“Sadly not. I haven’t had a chance to investigate yet. There’s only so much you can get from a werewolf’s sense of smell, and the demon army’s spies are

spread thin.”

Mao nodded, as if he’d expected that answer, and said, “Wa’s trying to forge ties with Rolmund as well. I heard the details from Jivanki, and I confirmed the information’s authenticity personally.”

Jivanki was a merchant from Rolmund, and one of Mao’s main sources of income.

“Have they found a way to Rolmund through the Windswept Dunes?”

Wa and Rolmund didn’t share a direct border—they were separated by the desert. The route through it was deemed too dangerous to travel, so the two countries had barely any contact with each other.

Mao shook his head and explained, “It’s still too difficult to build a proper road through the Windswept Dunes. But by your estimation, the desert will slowly vanish, right?”

“I see you even know what our lectures in the university are about.”

“It pays to be informed.”

Just how many informants does this guy have? He’s a better spy than the Heavenwatchers. Mao pointedly avoided talking about who his informers within the university were and smoothly brought us back on topic.

“Now, once the Windswept Dunes disappear, both nations will expand until they share a border. There will be an abundance of new, unclaimed, undeveloped land. Naturally, Wa wants as much of it as possible.”

“It’ll take centuries for the desert to revert. Aren’t they being a bit hasty?”

Though I said that, I would have acted as soon as possible if I were in the same position. The Chrysanthemum Court clearly had people with foresight among its members. Mao had yet to bring me faulty information, but I still wanted to confirm its veracity for myself. *Tomorrow I’ll go on a little trip.*

“So, why did you decide to tell me this?”

“As a patriotic Meraldian, it’s my duty to help its leaders whenever I can.”

He was lying through his teeth. And he knew well that werewolves could tell

when someone was lying, even when it wasn't obvious.

"Okay, that's a lie," Mao grunted, "but if Wa and Rolmund start trading, it's Meraldian merchants who'll lose out. If anything, we'd make far more money if the two nations were at war."

"Now look here—"

If you keep saying things like that, I might actually have to arrest you. Of course, I knew he didn't really mean it. Sure, he bribed everyone under the sun, but he was principled enough that he would never profit off of someone else's misfortune. It was for that reason that Ryunheit's Merchant Guild had chosen him as their leader.

"Tell me the truth for once, you lying swindler."

"Fine, fine. I'm telling you this because I like you," Mao said with a straight face.

That's gotta be a lie. I mean, I don't smell a lie on him but, it's gotta be, right?

Seeing the look on my face, Mao chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen you look so surprised. Is it really that strange that I trust you enough to want to help you?"

"No, but..."

Oh yeah, I forgot the Meraldian word for "like" is different from the Japanese version. Here it's used more often for a person you trust or see as a friend than in a romantic context.

Mao swirled his wineglass and said, "In the past, I was tricked into helping my boss smuggle illegal goods. Since then, I've had to resort to underhanded means just to eke out a living. I made excuses for myself, saying I had no other choice, but that doesn't change the truth."

"They weren't just excuses. If you'd lived your life on the straight and narrow, you wouldn't be sitting in front of me today."

"Thank you for saying that. But after seeing how honestly you've lived your life, despite all the power you've amassed, I've started thinking that maybe I don't have to resort to illicit means to make it big."

I mean, it only worked for me because I'm a werewolf, a mage, and have the backing of the entire demon army. Oh, and the knowledge of my past life. With that many advantages, anyone could have made it big. Mao's life had been much harder. He'd had to carve out a niche for himself with nothing and no one by his side. While I felt bad that he'd suffered such a fate, I didn't know what I could say to him that didn't sound patronizing.

Unaware of my thoughts, Mao kept on talking.

"The world needs at least one person living an honest life. As long as there's even one, I can keep on believing there's still hope left in this world."

"Sadly, I'm not the honest person you're looking for. I've done plenty of shady things myself."

I kicked Ashley off his throne to put Eleora in his place, and I'd even forged a new scripture for Rolmund's Sonnenlicht Order and agreed to pretend it had been "discovered." Not only that, but I'd tricked Zagar into his own demise. Sure, he may have assassinated Kuwol's king, but two wrongs didn't make a right. I was certain I'd go to hell when I died.

But Mao just smiled and said, "The things you feel guilty about are things almost anyone else would proudly parade as accomplishments. If that isn't proof that you're an honest man, then nothing is."

"I dunno about that..."

The people of this world had very different standards for good and evil than I did.

Mao downed the rest of his wine in one gulp. "Keep an eye on Rolmund and Wa. From what I've heard, Wa has secretly sent spies to Rolmund since before they were even an empire. Their very best have the know-how to cross the Windswept Dunes even without a proper road."

"If that's true, our historians are going to throw a fit. Do you have any proof for that claim?"

Mao immediately answered, "Remember the famous swordsmanship style, the Sashimael style? Or the Maykhara style of tea ceremony taught in the palace? The Sashimael style is the exact same as the Sashimae-ryu sword style

taught in Wa, and likewise Maykhara is taken from the Maehara tea ceremony.”

From the way Mao described Sashimae-ryu, it sounded pretty similar to Jigen-ryu in Japan. Seeing as the Sashimael style also had an emphasis on one-hit kills, I could definitely see the similarities. One of Woroy’s retainers, the old Sword Saint Barnack, was a master of the Sashimael style, and his lightning-fast slashes were always aimed at vital points. *I guess that explains why it’s such a good sword style.* The Maykhara customs in Rolmund also did resemble Japanese tea ceremony quite a bit. I had thought it was interesting how even in a different world similar customs popped up, but now I realized why. Both the Sashimael style and Maykhara had popped up in Rolmund around three hundred years ago, which made sense if someone from Edo period Japan had popped up in Wa around that time and taught them Edo Japan’s customs.

“If that’s true, it would mean Wa’s been monitoring Rolmund for three hundred years,” I said.

“I also heard from a customer that Wa has records of their observations for at least the past few centuries. I’m no historian, so I couldn’t really tell if his story was credible or not though.”

The Chrysanthemum Court had been established by Ason almost a thousand years ago. And Ason had almost certainly been a high-ranking noble from the Heian period. After him, generations of Japanese people had been summoned to Wa to help guide the Chrysanthemum Court. It wouldn’t be too surprising if one of them had decided it was important to send spies to foreign nations to keep tabs on them.

Mao gave me a thoughtful look. “So, what do you think of the information I brought you?”

“It’s worth more than you can imagine. If I only cared about Meraldia’s prosperity, I would use it to ruin relations between Wa and Rolmund, but...” I trailed off. *There’s no way I can do that.* Clearing my throat, I said, “I’ll move faster than Wa expects, and keep their attention on me. Hopefully I can convince them that they’re better off negotiating with Rolmund through Meraldia than going to them directly.”

I wasn’t the greatest of diplomats, so I needed a simple, safe plan that

wouldn't cause anyone harm even if it failed.

"Do you think everything will go as smoothly as you expect?" Mao asked in an exasperated voice, though there was mirth in his eyes. I smiled at him as I pulled a pen out of my drawer.

"No, which is why I need to start planning for contingencies. So go home and let me plot."

"I wish you wouldn't chase me out when I came here to help you," Mao said with a smile as he got to his feet. "I'm putting my faith in you, Veight."

Please don't, I don't need the added pressure. Judging by how things were shaping up, I'd need to go to Wa after all.

While Veight was worrying about how to handle Wa and Rolmund's relationship, Friede crumpled up a half-written letter and cradled her head in her hands.

"This won't work at all..."

"What's wrong?" Yuhette—who was sitting across from Friede—asked.

Friede toyed absently with her pen and replied, "Micha sent me a letter asking me to tell her about Meraldia's political system, but I don't know how to explain it properly."

Friede was of course referring to Eleora's niece, and the current heir to the Rolmund Empire's throne.

Yuhette chuckled and said, "Princess Micha sure loves talking about politics."

"How would you explain Meraldia's political system to someone, Yuhette?"

"She wants to hear your explanation, right? Not mine."

"Yeah, I guess."

In fact, Micha had even written in her letter, "If you can't even explain your country's political system in your own words, then you're a failure of a leader!" In a way, this was like homework that she had assigned Friede.

"I don't care about politics though..."

"Even though your mother is the Demon Lord and your father is her vice-

commander?”

“Yeah, well, they’re them and I’m me.” Friede puffed her chest out proudly. It didn’t matter how important her parents were, she wasn’t going to change herself.

Grinning, Yuhette added, “Maybe so, but we learned about this in class, remember?”

“Gah!”

Come to think of it, I do remember there being a lecture on our political system... Breaking out in a cold sweat, Friede desperately tried to recall what she’d been taught.

“Umm... Oh, I remember now! We have a three-branch system!”

“That’s right. I believe it was your father who said that centralizing authority would lead to corruption.”

That reminds me, it was dad who gave that lecture on politics, wasn’t it? Friede thought, before saying, “Okay, I think I remember now. We have a judicial branch, an executive branch, and a legislative branch, right?”

“Yep. See, you do remember.”

Friede beamed at the praise. Now that she’d hit her groove, the memories came flooding back.

“Ehehe. Legislative power rests with the council, the viceroys have executive authority over their respective cities and...who controls the judicial branch again?”

“The demon army.”

“Wait, they do? I don’t remember that part. I guess I’ll double-check my notes later...”

“I see you’ve gotten a lot more serious about your studies thanks to Princess Micha’s letters.”

“Well, I feel like I have a new long-distance teacher.”

“I wonder, is distance teaching really a thing?” Yuhette cocked her head to

one side.

“Apparently you can teach someone just through letters.”

“That sounds like it would take a lot of time and money though...”

“Yeah...” Friede had heard from her father that in his old world, letters traveled quickly and could be sent for cheap. “Hey, Yuhette, will you proofread the letter once I’m done with it?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

As Veight had predicted, a month passed before concrete plans for the journey to Wa were made. Friede, Yuhette, and Shirin would all head to Wa from Rynheit. They would also be accompanied by Joshua, the young werewolf from Rolmund who’d come to study under Veight.

“Why are you coming too?” Shirin asked in an annoyed voice. Unlike most dragonkin, he was almost as expressive as a regular human. He got it from his father, who was also more expressive than most dragonkin.

In an equally annoyed voice, Joshua replied, “I’m a student at Meraldia University too, you know? Got a problem with me tagging along?”

“You only just entered the officer academy the other day. You barely even know the basics, what good will you be in Wa?”

“Don’t ask me. Professor Veight told me to go, so I’m going.”

Friede didn’t understand why Shirin and Joshua were so hostile towards each other. Since Joshua was here on Veight’s orders, Shirin couldn’t really argue back, and he hung his head sadly.

“What is he thinking, sending a Rolmundian to Wa?”

Friede rarely ever saw Shirin look so sad, and she honestly felt a little bad for him.

In an attempt to cheer him up, she said, “Maybe he’s sending Joshua precisely because he’s from Rolmund.”

“What do you mean?” Shirin asked, curious enough to forget his melancholy

for a moment. Friede explained the conclusion she'd come to.

"You know how when we went to Rolmund we did more diplomacy than actual technology exchanges?"

Yuhette nodded. "True, we spent more time meeting with nobles than actually talking to scholars or other students."

"Which means this delegation also has more diplomatic importance than it seems on the surface."

Joshua and Shirin exchanged glances.

"Well..."

"You have a point..."

Glad that everyone agreed with her hypothesis, Friede added, "So, Joshua was selected for political reasons!"

"Okay, but what political reason exactly?" Joshua asked, scratching his head. Yuhette jumped in to answer.

"How do you think the Chrysanthemum Court will react if they see you in the delegation?"

"Hm? Dunno. I'm not that smart."

"I don't really understand human thought processes myself, but if they see a Rolmundian in the delegation, won't the Chrysanthemum Court be impressed by our diplomatic clout?" Shirin asked. Friede had vaguely suspected that was the case, and she nodded emphatically.

"They'll think Meraldia's so amazing that people from Rolmund go out of their way to come study here! Plus, you're related to Volka, the leader of Rolmund's werewolves, and a close aide to the empress."

"Oh, I get it now," Joshua said with a nod. "Though I don't really feel like I'm anyone important."

Friede smiled at him. "Even if you aren't, the fact that you're with us will make the Chrysanthemum Court think twice. Besides, you came here because you wanted to, right?"

“Pretty much. Granny Volka did say I should go, but I’m the one who made the final decision.” Joshua puffed his chest out proudly.

Friede nodded in agreement and said, “Which means you really do like Meraldia that much, right?”

“I mean, I came ’cause I respect Veight, not Meraldia...”

“But you do like Meraldia as well, *right?*”

“Well...yeah, I guess.” Blushing, Joshua scratched his head awkwardly. Friede didn’t seem to notice and patted his shoulder.

“See, that proves Meraldia’s a nice country. Hopefully the people in the Chrysanthemum Court think the same when they see us.”

“Y-Yeah...that’d be nice,” Joshua mumbled quietly, fidgeting. In an attempt to distract himself from Friede, he looked around. “Ah, hey you over there! Stop slacking and get back to work!” he shouted to one of the sailors lazing about, instead of loading cargo onto the ship they would be taking.

Incidentally, all of the sailors were canines instead of humans. Their tails whipped back and forth excitedly as they sniffed the boxes they were supposed to be lugging.

“Something smells nice.”

“Is there food in this?”

“I love this smell!”

“It smells so tasty!”

Joshua stalked over to the slacking canines. “Hurry up and get those boxes on board!”

Unfortunately, his yelling didn’t seem to have any effect on them.

“We still have time before we set sail.”

“Hey, there’s food in here, right?”

“Is it tasty?”

Annoyed, Joshua shouted, “Enough yapping! Get! Back! To! Work!”

Shirin sighed and said, "He really isn't used to dealing with other demon races, is he? I'll go rein him in."

Tail swishing back and forth, Shirin walked over to Joshua and the canines.

"Let me handle this, Joshua."

"You think you can get them working again?" Joshua balked.

"I *am* studying to be an officer in the demon army, you know. I can handle demons better than you."

Brimming with confidence, Shirin turned to the canines and said politely, "Could you please load the cargo onto the boat?"

"Hm? But we're not setting sail yet," one of the canines replied with a carefree smile, and Shirin sighed.

"Yes, but it will be too late if we start loading the boxes when it is time to sail. Please, just do as I ask." He kept his tone polite the entire way through. But the canines still weren't fazed.

"Don't worry, leave the boat stuff to us sailors."

"Anyway, is there food in this?"

"It smells great!"

They weren't listening to him at all. At a loss, Shirin glanced over at Friede and Yuhette.

Chuckling, Yuhette said, "Looks like he could use a hand. Why don't you go help, Friede?"

"Why me?"

"You're good with canines, aren't you?"

The Aindorf family had a canine maid, and Friede was good friends with a number of the canine soldiers in the demon army. While she was good at handling them, there were many different kinds of canines, the same way there were many different kinds of humans and werewolves. Still, she couldn't just sit by and watch while her friends struggled.

"Umm...all right, I guess I'll give it a shot."

Friede walked over to the canines and said in a bright voice, “Hello!”

“Hello!” they replied in unison, raising their hands into the air. Joshua and Shirin frowned, but the canines paid them no mind.

I guess the one thing all canines share is that they’re all happy-go-lucky... With how carefree they were, most of them rarely ever got stressed. They were also utterly loyal to their leader and didn’t need much food compared to humans, so they made for perfect sailors. Plus, you could fit three canines on a single human bed. But while they might be loyal to their leader, neither Friede nor any of the other children here were their leader.

Friede squatted down to eye level and said with a smile, “What do you guys think is in these boxes?”

The canines’ tails started whipping back and forth even faster as they rushed to answer all at once.

“Food!”

“Snacks!”

“Tasty treats!”

Friede chuckled at the almost identical responses. “You’re half-right. Inside these boxes are jars of sugar. They’re from Kuwol, and they’re *veeery* expensive.”

“Yaaaaay!” The canines looked ecstatic, even though they wouldn’t be getting the sugar themselves.

One of them cocked their head and asked, “But is it just sugar in there?”

“I thought I smelled fruit too.”

Canines possessed a sense of smell that was only surpassed by werewolves.

“You’re right, there’s also perfume bottles in these boxes. They’re from Rolmund, and they’re also *veeery* expensive.”

“Yaaaaaay!” The canines celebrated yet again.

Friede cast her gaze over them and said, “That’s why we need to get them all on the boat before someone tries to steal them. So will you load the cargo for

me?”

“I see!” The canines all nodded, seemingly convinced.

However, the one that looked like their leader stepped forward and said, “But voyages chartered by the Commonwealth Council often have their plans changed last-minute. If we load the cargo now and then someone comes and tells us our departure’s been delayed, we’ll need to unload it all again.”

“Oh, that’s a good point,” Friede said with a nod.

One of the other canines leaned against a crate and said, “The luggage is more at risk of being dropped when it’s being loaded and unloaded than it is of being stolen at the harbor.”

“Yeah. And if we don’t know what’s in the boxes, we won’t know where in the ship to store them,” another added.

“If they’re heavy we need to use the crane at the port, and that costs money, so the captain doesn’t want to use it more than he has to.”

“Plus, we’re keeping an eye on the boxes until it’s time to load them, so there’s no need to worry about them getting stolen.”

The sailors explained that they needed to know if their cargo was fragile, and whether or not it could afford to get wet. They also needed to know if it was food, since rats and other pests could infiltrate unsecured crates and eat through everything.

Impressed, Friede said, “I didn’t know that! Thanks for telling me!”

“You’re welcome.”

Seeing Friede and the canines get along, Joshua angrily muttered, “You should have said so in the first place then...”

“This is precisely why we assign dragonkin officers to look over canines,” Shirin added in an exasperated voice.

“You do?” Joshua asked, curious.

“Commanders need to be calm in any and all situations. This ship’s first mate and engineer are both dragonkin.”

Joshua and Shirin seemed to bond a little over their shared annoyance with canines. Seeing that, Friede smiled and said, “That’s great, everyone’s getting along!”

“That they are,” Yuhette said, returning Friede’s smile.

Just then, Veight walked out of the harbormaster’s office.

“All right, guys, we’re cleared to set sail! Get that cargo loaded!”

“Aye-aye!” The canines and Friede saluted Veight and got to work.

Before long, the ship left Lotz’s port and headed east, staying within sight of the coastline.

“We’re going to get off at the first port we stop at and head to the Windswept Dunes,” Veight explained to Friede.

“Okay!”

On one hand, Friede would feel safer with Veight around, but on the other, she didn’t really want to be chaperoned everywhere. She wanted to enjoy this field trip with her friends, without her dad butting in.

Veight could tell as much from her expression, so he added, “Don’t do anything too crazy while I’m gone, okay?”

“I’ll be as careful as I was in Rolmund, don’t worry.”

“That doesn’t sound reassuring at all.” Veight let out a long sigh. “Well, you’re old enough to look after yourself. I’ll trust your judgment.”

“Thanks, dad!”

Veight’s expression turned serious, and he said, “Just so you know, you’re half-responsible for your actions now.”

“Just half?”

“Since you’re not a full adult yet, it wouldn’t be fair to put the full burden of responsibility on you. The remaining half goes to me. Until you grow up, anyway.”

Friede’s expression was a mixture of sadness and relief. *So dad still doesn’t*

think I can fully take care of myself... Friede thought she'd matured a lot over her last trip, so it was a bit of a shock. *I guess it takes a lot to be considered a responsible adult.*

"I'll grow up in a flash, just you see."

"Well, there's no need to rush."

"Do you want me to grow up or not?"

Sometimes Friede didn't get her dad.

—The Heavenwatchers' Star—

While Veight and Friede were sailing towards Wa, Fumino was delivering her report to Tokitaka, her boss. Not only was Tokitaka the leader of the Heavenwatchers, but he was also a high-ranking member in the Chrysanthemum Court.

"It has been a long time since our last meeting, Lord Tokitaka."

"Thank you for making the difficult journey back. Would you like some snacks?"

"What did you buy today?"

"Mitarashi dango—made by the newest branch of a long-established sweets shop."

Everyone in the Heavenwatchers knew Tokitaka always found the best sweet shops to get his confectionaries from.

"They certainly smell delicious."

"Don't they?"

After Fumino took a bite of the dango, she began giving her report. "Friede's party should land at Nagie Harbor tomorrow. Demon Empress Gomoviroa and Veight disembarked at the Windswept Dunes along with a contingent of werewolves to continue their investigation of the desert."

Tokitaka breathed an audible sigh of relief. "While I do wish to see Lord Veight again, I'm grateful he won't be joining us just yet. I need to determine Lady Friede's worth, and that won't be possible if he's present."

Fumino smiled at that.

“Fear not. I can say for certain that Friede is a capable woman who will lead Meraldia to greater heights in the future.”

“It’s rare to hear such praise from you. I see she’s made quite the impression.”

“She really has. Whenever I talk to her, I’m reminded of her father. It feels like she’s poised to do great things.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to meeting her.” Tokitaka narrowed his eyes. “However, Fumino, I’m afraid I’m going to have to take you off this mission.”

“What? Why?!” Fumino stiffened, the skewer of dango halfway to her mouth.

Tokitaka gave her a reassuring smile and said, “Fear not. I have absolutely no complaints about the quality of your work. But there’s something I need to see for myself.” He turned to a corner of the room. “Come out.”

“Yes, father.”

A young woman dressed like a ninja emerged from the darkness. Her serene expression made her look mature beyond her years, but she was barely older than Friede.

“I-Iori?” Fumino asked, surprised.

Iori was Tokitaka’s adopted daughter and an apprentice Heavenwatcher. However, being an apprentice, she wasn’t yet fit to take on missions alone.

Iori bowed respectfully to Fumino and said, “It has been far too long, Lady Fumino. I had my coming of age ceremony a few days ago, and was made an official member of the Heavenwatchers.”

“Oh, congratulations,” Fumino said. *If I’d known, I would have prepared a proper gift at least.*

Tokitaka turned back to Fumino and said, “I plan to put Iori in charge of guiding Lady Friede. Fumino, I want you to go to the Windswept Dunes and assist Lord Veight. You’re the only one capable of keeping an eye on him.”

“Understood.”

Iori bowed to Tokitaka and Fumino. "I will take my leave then."

"Be careful about what you say, Iori," Fumino warned. "Meraldians have a different set of values from us. You must keep that in mind when talking to them."

"Of course, Lady Fumino."

Iori nodded and faded into the darkness. Every member of the Heavenwatchers, even young apprentices, were masters of stealth.

After Iori left, Fumino returned to her snacks and asked her boss, "Are you sure about this, Lord Tokitaka?"

"Lord Veight isn't the only person training up a new generation of leaders. I'm quite busy myself with Iori and my other apprentices' educations."

Folding his arms, Tokitaka let out another sigh. He had no kids of his own, but he'd adopted many children with nowhere else to go, including Iori.

"By the way, I heard Lady Friede caused quite a stir in Rolmund."

"You know of that already?"

"The crown princess being kidnapped was a big enough deal that word of it reached even here."

The Heavenwatchers actually had a reliable information network in Rolmund. They were the descendants of the ninjas who'd traveled to Rolmund in the distant past. Though Fumino was a high-ranking member of the Heavenwatchers, she didn't know much about them, since her jurisdiction was Meraldia. Information about Wa's spies in Rolmund was highly classified, for the spies' own safety.

"From what I'd heard, Lady Friede has become good friends with Princess Micha. She seems to know how to get along with people quite well."

"She is Veight's daughter, after all," Fumino replied with a smile, and Tokitaka nodded.

"Indeed. I wonder if she'll get along with Iori as well."

"I...can't say, honestly." Fumino knew about Iori's past, so she couldn't in

good faith say yes.

Tokitaka stared at the darkness Iori had disappeared into and said, “If she can’t, Lady Friede will have a hard time governing a nation as diverse as Meraldia.”

“We’re finally here!” Friede stepped off the boat onto Nagie’s pier and excitedly looked around. “Wow!”

“There are a lot of wooden buildings here. I heard that Wa has many forests from which to harvest lumber, but can they really afford to cover their windows with paper?” Shirin mused.

Though his voice was calmer than Friede’s, the way his tail wagged back and forth made it clear he was excited too. He was a huge fan of Wa’s culture.

“Ah, I see! They accept that their buildings are going to degrade, and they carefully maintain and repair them. That’s why they make their windows out of paper. It’s a much easier material to repair than glass.”

Shirin strode forward, his voice getting more heated as he talked. He looked like he was heading towards the shopping district.

“Shirin, weren’t we told to wait for our guide at the pier?” Yuhette said. “You shouldn’t go off on your own.”

He ignored her warning, so Joshua ran up and blocked his path.

“Hold up, Shirin! Aren’t you the one who said we shouldn’t do anything without permission?! Calm down, man.”

“I am calm. I— Hm?”

It was only when Shirin turned around that he realized he’d gotten pretty far from the rest of their party.

“How in the world did I end up here?”

“Seriously, pull yourself together.”

Joshua grabbed Shirin’s arm and started marching back to where Friede and Yuhette waited.

“Wait, I just want to inspect that earthen storehouse. I’d heard in places

susceptible to frequent fires they make buildings out of mud instead of wood and I—”

“You can check it out later.”

“If possible, I’d like to take a sample of the wall to study too.”

“Are you trying to get arrested?”

Shirin dug his heels and his tail into the ground, but Joshua successfully dragged him back.

“Welcome back, Shirin,” Friede said with a sympathetic smile. She shared Shirin’s excitement.

The Wa officials who’d come to greet Friede and the others gave the children stern looks.

“Honored guests, please do not wander off alone.”

“If anything were to happen to you, we would be held responsible, so for our sakes, please stay here.”

“Incidentally, where is Lady Fumino?” Neither of these officials were the party’s guide—they were just there for the token customs check. Yuhette looked around worriedly and said, “It seems she hasn’t arrived yet.”

“That’s weird,” Friede said, cocking her head. In the many years that Friede had known her, Fumino had never once been late to anything. Something serious must have happened if she was being held up.

Before Friede could ask though, Joshua shouted, “Dragon’s Breath!”

Dragon’s Breath was the demon army’s term for gunpowder, and Joshua’s sensitive werewolf nose had picked up its acrid scent. A second later, Friede noticed the smell as well. As she was only half-werewolf, her nose wasn’t quite as good as a purebred werewolf’s.

“Friede, get behind me!” Joshua shouted as he transformed. His clothes were ripped to shreds, but he didn’t have time to care about that right now.

Flustered, Shirin asked, “W-Wait, Joshua, are you certain?!”

“Positive! Dammit, we’ve been ambushed! Draw your swords!”

However, Friede didn't look worried at all.

“Ah, don't worry! Everything's fine, Joshua, you don't need to overreact!”

A second later, a young woman appeared in front of the group. At first glance, she looked like an ordinary citizen, but Friede noticed that she was wearing leather boots instead of straw sandals. Veight had always told her that you could learn a lot about a person just by looking at what they wore.



In a curt voice, the woman said, "I am Iori of the Heavenwatchers. I will be your guide here in place of Lady Fumino."

"What happened to her?" Friede asked.

"I'm afraid that's classified information."

Annoyed at being ignored, Joshua shouted, "Why do you reek of gunpowder, huh?!"

"I do? Oh, it must be because of this."

Iori tightened the drawstrings of the pouch on her waist. "My store of gunpowder got wet during my voyage here, so I was letting it dry. Normally, weapons that use gunpowder have their cartridges sealed tight, so the fact that you could smell it at all should have told you that I wasn't planning on attacking you."

"Excuse me?!" Joshua bared his fangs, but Friede hurriedly held out a hand to stop him.

"Iori's right, Joshua. That's why I wasn't worried."

"Huh?!"

Friede gave Joshua a gentle smile. "It's okay, you can transform back."

"But..."

"There's no need to pick a fight with someone you've just met."

"What's so bad about that?" After a moment of indecision, Joshua finally transformed back. Naked from the waist up, he scratched his head awkwardly. "I don't get how you're so calm about this..."

Friede ignored him and turned back to Iori.

"It's nice to meet you, Iori. I'm Friede Aindorf."

"I'm aware. Follow me, I'll guide you to the inn you're staying at tonight."

She walked off without even a backward glance to make sure they were following.

"What's with her?" Joshua grumbled as he pulled out a new shirt to wear.

“You’ll never understand,” Shirin said with a sigh.

—lori’s Observations—

That’s the famous Black Werewolf King’s daughter? lori thought angrily as she walked towards the inn. Initially, she’d assumed the girl next to her was Friede. Even now, judging from the conversation she overheard, the girl called Yuhette was far wiser than Friede.

If she’s lacking in knowledge, she’s probably not a good fighter either. Friede’s gait and the way she carried herself told lori that she mostly specialized in hand-to-hand wrestling techniques. But the dragonkin boy and werewolf boy traveling with Friede were clearly better fighters than her. As far as lori could tell, they were as good as she was at fighting, which was pretty good. This meant that among her companions, Friede wasn’t the best at anything.

Pathetic. Why does everyone fawn over her so much? Actually, that’s a stupid question. It’s obviously because of her bloodline. She’s only here because she’s the daughter of Veight the Black Werewolf King. I can’t imagine any other reason she was chosen. In the end, she’s just riding off the coattails of her parents, like every other noble. lori bit her lip in frustration. Behind her, she could hear Friede talking to her friends.

“What kind of inn are we staying at?”

“Apparently, it’s a martial arts dojo and not an inn at all. It’s well-guarded, and from what I’ve heard, the owner of the dojo owes the werewolves a favor,” Yuhette said.

“It’s not *just* a martial arts dojo, it’s a Kogusokujutsu dojo,” Shirin explained. “That’s one of Wa’s traditional styles. It focuses on teaching practical grappling techniques that can be used on the battlefield, even when you’re fully armored. If only dragonkin were more human-shaped, I would have been able to learn it too.”

“Oh, that’s the style Professor Vodd teaches, isn’t it? It looks kinda hard,” Joshua said.

lori assumed that eavesdropping on the visitors was part of her mission. If not, then why else had her adopted father bothered to send her instead of

someone else? *I need to show that I'm as skilled as Lady Fumino. If Lord Tokitaka thinks I'm useless, he might abandon me.* Though Tokitaka was famous in Wa for his compassion and benevolence, Iori still couldn't bring herself to trust him. She couldn't trust anyone who claimed to be her caretaker.

In the end, the only person you can trust is yourself. Trying to play nice and make friends with people is just a waste of time. Annoyed by the friendly conversation unfolding behind her, Iori nevertheless listened intently.

As they climbed the last of the stone steps, Friede and the others saw a magnificent front gate. The doors were wide open, and a paved path led to an imposing building. A sign above the building said "Seiga-style Kogusokujutsu Dojo" in bold letters.

"Wow..." Friede whispered.

The dojo was filled with the sounds of people training.

"Hiyaaaah!"

"No, you have to tense your palm more!"

"Daaaaaah!"

"This may be just practice, but you should still try to make it as hard for your partner to throw you as possible!"

"Yes, master!"

This training sounds rough. Friede thought as the voices washed over her. When Veight taught Friede wrestling, it was a lot more enjoyable and a lot less serious than this.

An older man was sweeping the floor in front of the gate. Friede addressed him in Wa's language. "Umm, excuse me. My name is Friede Aindorf. I believe my friends and I are supposed to be staying here for a while."

The old man shot Iori a brief glance, then smiled at Friede. "We have been awaiting your arrival, Lady Friede. Please, come inside, all of you."

The old man stepped through the gate, and a group of men dressed in training uniforms came running over. He handed his broom to them, and they gave him a coat in return. *Huh?* Friede had thought the man was a servant of

some sort, but the disciples all seemed to be treating him with respect. *Wait, is this like those stories I've read about knights dressing up like peasants and—*

Just then, one of the disciples said, “Master, you should let us take care of the cleaning.”

“Don’t be a fool. Youngsters like you should focus on their training. Leave the chores to me.” Once he’d shooed the disciples away, the old man turned back to Friede. “My apologies, I forgot to introduce myself. I am this dojo’s master, Seiga.”

I knew it! Shirin and the others seemed taken aback, but Friede excitedly bowed her head. *This is just like one of my favorite stories!*

“It’s an honor to meet you, Master Seiga!” she said.

“Hahaha, what a well-mannered girl.”

Seiga led the party into one of the dojo’s many rooms. The dojo itself was more of a large estate where people could stay and train.

“Many students here understand Meraldian, as do I. So you needn’t worry yourself about speaking in only Wa. But before we speak any further, you should rest and wash away the exhaustion of your long journey,” Seiga said with a smile.

Friede bowed again and replied, “Thank you very much. I can’t believe we get to stay at such a wonderful place!”

“This used to be a small dojo, but its popularity rose considerably after Lord Veight came here to learn. As you can see, I have many more disciples now.”

After eliminating the nue, Veight had become famous in Wa as well. And since Seiga had been the one to teach Veight and his companions Kogusokujutsu, his fame rose in turn. Seiga hadn’t really enjoyed his newfound popularity, or the wildly exaggerated rumors people were spreading about him, but he also didn’t have the heart to turn away students coming to learn from him.

“My sole skill lies in martial arts, so I feel it’s my duty to teach anyone who asks. Kogusokujutsu is a martial art that focuses on incapacitating foes without

unduly harming them, so hopefully if it spreads, battles will become less bloody.”

Joshua stepped forward and said, “I want to learn Gusokujutsu, not Kogusokujutsu! Can you teach me?!”

Seiga shook his head. “Gusokujutsu is meant to be used on the battlefield, so even demonstrating the techniques can be dangerous. Besides, an inexperienced practitioner may kill someone by accident. I’m afraid I cannot agree to teach someone I have only just met.”

“Is it really that dangerous?”

“Hahaha, certainly so. It’s a style made to *kill* people.” Seiga laughed heartily, but then his expression turned serious. “While I cannot teach you, it would be rude to completely disregard a request from an honored guest. I can show you a little bit of what it’s like. Come at me with any technique you wish.”

“Are you sure? I’m a werewolf, you know.”

“So long as you don’t transform, there shouldn’t be any problem. Now, come. And don’t hold back. It’ll be dangerous for you if you don’t use your full strength.”

Seiga smiled, still sitting on the floor. Joshua scratched his head and hesitantly got to his feet.

“All right then. Take this!”

Joshua launched a low kick at Seiga’s shoulder.

“Ah!” Friede gasped in surprise. Joshua, on the other hand, was so stunned he couldn’t even speak as Seiga flipped him onto the cushion in front of him.

“Huh...” he muttered after a few seconds. Seiga was still kneeling, with one hand gripping Joshua’s ankle.

“When you kick, the leg you’re using as a pivot becomes your weak point. You need to be careful your opponent doesn’t target it if they’re lower to the ground than you. Or else you’ll end up like this.”

“Uraaagh!”

Seiga stepped on Joshua's wrist and raised him by his ankle, leaving the young werewolf at his mercy. Joshua writhed in pain as his joints were stretched to their limit, and Friede exclaimed, "That was amazing, Seiga!"

"S-Stop gushing and get him off me! Owwww!"

Seiga released Joshua and held out a hand to help him up. "In a real battle, I would have been able to break Joshua's ankle and deliver a concussive blow to the back of his head. Moreover, I had one hand free the entire time, so I would have been able to draw my short sword and cut off his head if I so wished. Most warriors would not even have time to realize what had happened before they were slain."

"N-Now that's scary."

"Indeed, it is terrifying."

Seiga looked over Joshua's ankle to make sure it was fine, then smiled at him. "If you truly wish to master Gusokujutsu, I suggest you ask Master Vodd to teach you. The scant amount I would be able to teach you in the time we have would not suffice. You need to spend years training under a proper teacher."

"Okay..." Joshua said dejectedly, and Friede chuckled.

—Iori's Observations—

That night, Iori spotted Friede alone in the dojo while she was doing her rounds. Friede was staring intently at the wall that held the nameplates of all the students who had ever studied here.

Iori stepped inside and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I was just surprised to find Mao's name here. He lives in Ryunheit now, but he's still considered one of this dojo's disciples?"

"That's right." Iori nodded, looking uninterested in Friede's reply. Suddenly, a question came to her, and she asked, "Lady Friede, what kind of martial arts do you study?"

"I've mostly learned the traditional hunting techniques of werewolves. There's no style name or anything, but they're mostly throwing and grappling techniques." Friede gestured emphatically as she explained the wrestling

techniques all werewolves learned.

Mostly throwing and grappling techniques, huh? They're demon techniques, so they're probably all brawn and no finesse. If they haven't even bothered giving their style a name, it's probably not nearly as refined as Gusokujutsu. Disgust welled up within Iori.

"So it's similar to Gusokujutsu. Since we're already in the dojo, why don't we have a match?"

"You know Kogusokujutsu, Iori?"

"Naturally. There are numerous Kogusokujutsu dojos in the capital," Iori said in a cold voice. "So, do you want to spar?"

"Yeah, let's do it!"

Friede bowed to Iori, then dropped into a stance. Iori followed suit, lowering her center of gravity. *Her stance is full of openings. I could kill her in a thousand ways right now.* Iori sneered to herself.

"Let's begin."

She stepped forward and reached for Friede's collar.

"Haah... Haaah..." Sweat dripped down Iori's forehead as she struggled to catch her breath. Friede had proved a far more formidable foe than she'd anticipated.

Her stance is full of openings, her technique is shoddy, but she's insanely fast! Though Friede looked human, her movements were beyond anything a regular human could achieve. Her reflexes were blisteringly quick too, and Iori couldn't land a grab no matter how hard she tried. If she pushed too hard and tried to force it, she just got countered. Friede's technique was nothing to write home about, but her speed more than made up for it. Not only that, but her stamina seemed bottomless.

"Y-You're good, Iori," Friede said, surprised.

That's my line! I can't believe I'm being cornered by this newbie! Iori's lack of stamina was her biggest weakness. She was almost always the first to tire in

prolonged battles. At this rate, she would certainly lose.

If I want to become the official successor to the Mihoshi family, I can't afford to lose here! Not to a girl who's just taking advantage of her natural werewolf abilities and doesn't know the first thing about fighting! Iori could already tell Friede's reflexes and physical abilities were a result of her werewolf blood. *No way I'm letting her beat me! She's a noble who had everything handed to her. I started from nothing and worked my butt off to get this far. We're not equals at all!* Determined to win at all costs, Iori decided to switch from Kogusokujutsu to Gusokujutsu.

"I'm done holding back!"

"B-Bring it on!"

Iori launched a lightning-fast punch at Friede's face. Friede leaned back to dodge it, but that opened her up to a follow-up attack. *You can use more than just your hands to grapple!* Iori stepped forward and hooked Friede's foot with her own.

"Ah—" Iori grabbed Friede's arm as she shouted in surprise.

I've got one arm and one leg now! She can't break her fall! Iori tripped Friede with her leg, forcing her center of gravity backwards. One push would be enough to make Friede fall now.

Take this! Mihoshi-style Gusokujutsu technique, Thunderclap! Thunderclap was a throwing skill that prevented the opponent from effectively breaking their fall. The Seiga style had a similar technique, but it had been modified to ensure the opponent didn't break their head or back in the fall.

It's over! All Iori had to do was stop Friede's fall just before she hit her head and the match would be settled. Or so she thought, for a second later her world quite literally turned upside-down.

"Nuaaah?!" A strained scream escaped her lips, and she held out her hands to break her fall on pure instinct. It was only after she hit the ground that her brain caught up to the fact that she'd been thrown. "Huh...?"

Friede looked down at her worriedly. "Are you okay, Iori?"

“Ah, yes.”

Iori was more or less able to piece together what had happened based on Friede’s position and the way she fell.

“Did you throw me over you as you fell?” Iori asked.

“Yeah. I couldn’t stop myself from falling after you tripped me, so I just sort of went for it,” Friede said with an embarrassed smile.

Chills ran down Iori’s spine. *How did she get out of my armlock?! And how did she throw me when she hadn’t even grabbed me from anywhere?!*

When Iori had tripped Friede she’d stepped forward to ensure there wasn’t any distance between the two of them. Friede had managed to throw Iori without any leverage at all—using only the strength of her core. *What kind of training do you have to do to pull off something like that? I guess it paid off, since with a skill like that you can always throw your opponent no matter how disadvantageous a situation you’re in...* The reason Friede’s stance had been so full of openings was because she had the ability to deal with any technique that was thrown at her. *She’s a monster... This girl might look like a human, but she definitely isn’t one.*

Unaware of Iori’s thoughts, Friede held out a hand to help her up.

“That was a Gusokujutsu technique, wasn’t it? I couldn’t break my fall at all!” Friede said with a smile.

“Yes... I’m sorry.”

Iori had used a dangerous technique in what should have just been a casual sparring match. She knew she would face repercussions for that. This was a serious enough offense that it could become a diplomatic issue.

However, Friede just said in a cheerful voice, “I think I understand what Seiga meant now.”

“Huh?”

“About how Gusokujutsu is too dangerous to pass down.”

Wait, what does she mean by that? Iori gave Friede a puzzled look as she got to her feet.

“Because Gusokujutsu is so lethal, it’s dangerous to even practice, right? Like with that technique you used earlier, I wouldn’t have been able to break my fall.”

“Yes... There have been many accounts of Gusokujutsu practitioners dying during training. That’s almost never happened with Kogusokujutsu.”

Friede nodded in understanding. “It would be pretty sad to die during training. If you ask me, Kogusokujutsu is the better martial art.”

“But it’s weaker than Gusokujutsu.”

“I don’t know about that,” Friede replied with a grin. “No matter how strong a technique is, it’s only useful in a real battle if you practice it a bunch first. Because Gusokujutsu is so dangerous, it’s hard to get as much practice in. And even then, in battle you might hesitate if you don’t want to kill your opponent.”

“I suppose that’s true...”

Iori had needed to put in extra effort to ensure she didn’t kill Friede with her technique. It certainly would have been easier to use the technique if she hadn’t cared about Friede’s safety. Friede also had a point about practice quantity. Gusokujutsu needed a partner to practice with, and it had few practitioners. Most people who learned it didn’t have nearly enough practice with it.

I was just thinking about how lethal a martial arts style might be, but on the whole, Friede has the right of it. Kogusokujutsu’s strength lay in the fact that it could be practiced without fear of accidentally killing anyone. In retrospect, that should have been obvious, but Iori felt like she’d just had a revelation. I learned something new from that.

Iori stared intently at Friede, and the young girl cocked her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me.”

Iori had to admit Friede had taught her something, even if it galled her. She bowed, which fortunately hid the tears of frustration forming in her eyes. *To think this ignorant child would teach me something...*

Friede gave her a worried look and asked, “A-Are you sure you’re okay? Does it hurt anywhere? Or, umm, did I say something to offend you?”

In a quiet voice, lori murmured, “How could you tell?”

“I can sense people’s feelings based on the smell of their sweat,” Friede replied, some of the worry receding. “Oh, it’s because I’m part-werewolf, not because I’m a weirdo or anything.”

So she’s able to read my mind thanks to the abilities she was born with?

“That’s exactly the problem!” lori lashed out.

“Huh?! What is?!” Friede looked confused.

You can read my emotions, so why can’t you tell how I feel?!

Angry, lori shouted, “It’s not fair that you get to read people’s minds just like that! You didn’t have to train at all—you were just born with that ability!”

“Uhh...” Friede awkwardly scratched her head. She stared at lori and asked in a hesitant voice, “Is it really that unfair?”

“Yes!”

lori had been able to hold it in until now, but this was the last straw.

“Why do you get to be so strong?! You’re fast, have sharp reflexes, and can even read people’s minds! It must be nice just being born with all those talents, right?!”

“Yeah. It’s why I’m not especially proud of them or anything,” Friede said simply. But that just annoyed lori even more.

“I-I worked so hard—so damn hard! I struggled every step of the way. But I...I...”

There was so much lori wanted to say, but she couldn’t get the words out.

After a brief moment of thought, Friede said, “Your emotions changed halfway through when you were saying that, didn’t they?”

“See, that’s what’s so unfair about what you can do!”

lori tried to punch Friede in the face, but Friede just blocked the fist with her

palm. She made it look effortless too.

“S-Sorry. I’ve always been dense, Iori, so I don’t get what you mean.”

“I’m saying not to be so godsdamned nonchalant about yourself!”

“You didn’t just say *that*.”

Iori unleashed a flurry of punches, but Friede simply blocked them all. She didn’t even try to counterattack. Even though Iori was fighting as hard as she could, Friede was able to take her like it was nothing. Of course, she already knew that a human couldn’t match a werewolf in a head-on fight, but she didn’t stop throwing punches. Iori couldn’t even tell why she was still fighting anymore.

“I’m not like you! I was born to a commoner family. I lack the overwhelming strength demons have! I can’t even use prediction magic! And I use a gun instead of a sword because I’m not good enough to beat anyone with a sword! Even my Gusokujutsu skills are pathetic!”

“No, they’re not, you’re really strong! I haven’t seen anyone as strong as you before, Iori!”

“Well, you’re stronger than me!”

Iori threw in a feint before launching a deadly roundhouse kick, but Friede dodged it while barely looking. Iori would never get a hit in as long as she was on the offensive. Her only hope of landing a single blow was to aim for a counter when Friede came at her.

Smiling as she dodged, Friede said, “Yeah, but I’m half-werewolf, so it doesn’t count.”

“And that’s what pisses me off! You just have all this power thanks to your birth!”

Friede’s smile vanished. “That’s true.”

Huh?! Suddenly afraid, Iori jumped backwards. It felt like there was a blade pressed against her throat. But then Friede smiled again and waved casually at Iori.

“Actually, never mind. I’ve been working pretty hard too, but it’s nothing

compared to how much effort you've put in. Sorry I was born a werewolf."

"Ah, uh, that's not..."

It was then that Iori realized what she'd been saying. *I should have known. I'm not the only one that's faced hardship because of my birth. I'm sure she's also...*

Iori knew that over a decade ago, Meraldia's humans fought a vicious war against the demons. It had happened when Iori had just been a baby, but to Tokitaka and Fumino, it was still a recent memory. *Friede was born to a human and demon couple in a country where humans and demons used to kill each other.* From the histories Iori had read, Friede's mother, Airia, had been Ryunheit's viceroy when her father, Veight, had invaded as a general of the demon army. Had Veight not handled the situation diplomatically, Airia might have died. A lot of time had passed since then, but it was still unthinkable to most people for a human and a demon to marry. Friede was the only half-demon half-human child in the entire country.

Of course, Iori knew that didn't invalidate her complaints, but she had to admit to herself that she'd been rude. She bowed and said, "I'm sorry, Lady Friede. I said something terribly rude."

"Huh?! Oh, no. It's fine! Besides, I'm the one at fault here."

"No...you're not..."

Iori hung her head and staggered outside.

"Huh?! Iori!"

Don't say my name! Iori disappeared into the thicket behind the mansion and didn't return until morning.

"I'm telling you, Joshua, give up on learning Gusokujutsu," Friede said to Joshua as they were returning from Nagie to the capital the next morning. "The techniques are too dangerous, and you won't be able to practice with anyone. It doesn't matter how powerful they are if you can't work to master them, right?"

"Well... Ah, but Vodd and Veight can use the techniques, so I can practice with them, right?"

Shirin and Yuhette shook their heads in unison.

“Both of them are too busy to practice with you all the time.”

“Besides, in Ryunheit the biggest threats you’ll face are drunks and pickpockets. You wouldn’t want to kill them, would you?”

Joshua fell silent, unable to argue back.

Friede smiled and said, “You’re a nice guy, so you’d hesitate to use lethal moves even if you mastered them.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Really strong people do it, so probably.” Friede looked over at Iori as she said that.

Are you referring to me?! Iori had told Friede to keep their sparring match a secret, so she hadn’t told anyone. Not only that, but Friede seemed to genuinely respect Iori. Unbelievable as it was, even though Friede had won, she considered Iori the stronger fighter. Despite the fact that Iori had been so rude to Friede last night.

Is there anyone in the world who’s actually this pure? Before Iori would have said no without a doubt, but now she just didn’t know.

Flustered, she averted her gaze from Friede.

“So, Iori’s showing Friede and the others around? I’d like to meet her sometime; she sounds interesting,” I said to Fumino as she told me how things were in Wa.

“She takes everything a bit too seriously, and she has a hard time opening up to others... Hm, I’m getting a reading in this direction, Veight.”

Most of the Heavenwatchers could use prediction magic, Fumino included. Prediction magic was more limited than it sounded, and could only predict things a few seconds to a few hours into the future. However, it was still a huge boon for exploring the Windswept Dunes, since she could use it to tell us where the sandworms would be ahead of time.

“Another sandworm, huh? All right, everyone, we’re stopping here. Someone call the Demon Empress over.”

I called for a pause and marked the spot on my map. Master came floating over a few minutes later.

“Another sandworm? They’re such a nuisance.”

“The sandscales did say this is where their nest was.”

Pushing deeper into the Windswept Dunes was proving harder than expected. It wasn’t just the sandworms that were a threat, but the raging sandstorms and the difficult terrain proved to be challenging as well.

“There are different varieties of sandworms. Which type are we dealing with here?” Master asked calmly.

“My prediction magic brought up an image of sand flying everywhere, so it’s probably the type that jumps out to attack,” Fumino replied.

The sandworm I’d blown up before had been a different breed that set traps and lies in wait like an antlion. It was an effective feeding strategy, but it also meant its range was limited. Meanwhile, this sandworm Fumino had found was one that chased after its prey and jumped out to kill it. These were smaller than the trap-laying types, but they were faster and moved stealthily through the sand. Of course, small was a relative term—they were still as long as telephone poles. Their jaws were also big enough to swallow a human whole. The bigger ones were the size of trains.

“Has it noticed us?” I asked.

“I don’t think so... We’re still a good distance away from it.”

One sandworm wouldn’t be a problem, but if one spotted us, chances were others would too. A horde of them at once would be trouble.

As I was debating taking a detour, Fumino shouted, “Ah! It’s coming our way!”

“What?!”

Did it pick up on the vibrations caused by our walking from all the way over there? Damn it. Well, if it’s found us, I guess we have to fight.

“Werewolves, prepare for battle! Fumino, cover us!”

“Roger!”

Fumino grabbed some throwing darts from her pockets. They had tough steel wires attached to them, which could be used to entangle enemies they hit. Meanwhile, my werewolves and I raised our Blast Rifles. Things would get dicey if we let the sandworm close in on us, so a long-range battle was our best bet.

“Over there!” Fumino shouted, throwing a dart to show where she was pointing at.

Everyone aimed their rifles in that direction. A second later, the sandworm leapt up in a torrent of sand.

I jumped into the air and shouted, “It’s after me again!”

Most monsters had a tendency to go after people with large mana reserves.

“Don’t shoot!”

The bullets wouldn’t do much against a creature this big, so it would just be a waste of ammo. Instead, I created a blade of pure mana and slashed down at the worm.

“Haaah!”

The mana blade was big enough to slice the worm cleanly in two. While these sandworms were fast, their movements weren’t very complex. I didn’t even need to transform to dispatch one, as long as I knew it was coming.

As I landed on the ground with worm guts spilling all around me, I shouted, “Retreat back to base camp! The other sandworms will be lured here by the smell soon! They eat their own kind, and we don’t want to get caught up in their feeding frenzy!”

If you killed one worm in a nest, the others would gather in no time. Fortunately, they often killed each other in the fight to get choice pickings, but we didn’t want to be here for that bloodbath.

I let out a sigh of relief once we reached the base camp.

“I’m beat...”

It was burning hot during the day, freezing at night, sandstorms happened every other day, and sandworms roamed every inch of the inner desert. Even

my tenacious werewolves needed frequent rests or they'd collapse.

"By the way, Master, how do those sandworms survive out here? They're lucky to get prey every few years; shouldn't they starve?"

"Was it not you who taught me that poikilotherms can survive on very little food? Thanks to their massive size, the worms lose very little heat to diffusion, and because they stay underground most of the time, they can preserve their water content as well."

"That does make sense, but..." I said. *There's a limit to how much energy you can conserve that way.*

One of the sandscales who was part of the investigation team walked over and said, "At the pace we're going, our food and water won't last. And the further we head into the desert, the more sandworm nests we'll encounter. Our ancestors tried many times to get through this stretch, but in the end, they all gave up."

"Well, that's reassuring. There's one thing I find strange though."

I looked down at the map. This had been nagging at me for a while now.

"Master, is it just me, or is there a pattern to where the sandworms make their habitats? Look, if you trace their nests on this map..."

"I see, they appear to be branching out in a circle from some central location."

"There's gotta be a reason for that, right?"

"On the surface, the desert geography is uniform in this region, so if there is a reason, it must lie underground."

Underground, huh... I thought, then said, "Oh yeah, Master, do you remember Draught's Legacy? It sent its tendrils underground to soak up as much mana as it could."

"Oooh, that's an astute observation. I, too, was thinking we might have a similar situation here."

Master looked excited that I'd come to the same conclusions as her. Meanwhile, the sandscales and Fumino seemed to be arguing about something.

“Lady Fumino, can we really trust them?”

“I don’t think there’s anyone more knowledgeable about monsters than those two, at least not on this continent.”

One of the sandscales cocked his head. “Perhaps, but aren’t they wasting too much time researching?”

“Well, the purpose of this mission is to *investigate* the desert, after all. Besides, this is how they always are.”

“Really?”

“Very much so.”

While I could make out the words, I was too focused on the sandworms to really pay attention to what they were saying. Eventually, Fumino walked back over to us.

“By the way, Veight,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Are you worried about Friede?”

I smiled and said, “Friede’s her own person now, and I’m here.”

I had no idea what the Chrysanthemum Court would make of Friede, but I hadn’t raised her for the sake of impressing them. They could say whatever they wanted about her; it wouldn’t change the fact that I was proud of her.

“I’m not that worried, no.”

“Really?”

“I mean, it’d be a lie if I said I wasn’t worried at all, but...”

I was mostly worried about her causing a stir. But I knew it would be bad parenting to be overprotective. I needed to have faith in my daughter.

“Anyway, Fumino, we’re thinking of investigating the sandworms a bit more. The locations of their nests appear to be organized in some way. In fact, we may be able to chart out a route through the desert that avoids them entirely.”

“Understood. I’ll ask for more supplies so you can keep researching.”

This desert appeared to hold more secrets than I'd initially expected. *Though, I do hope Friede is doing all right.*

—Iori's Observations—

As they rode along the highway to the capital, Iori once again eavesdropped on Friede's conversation with her friends...

As I thought, she's not the best in any field among her friends. Yuhette knew more about theology and debate, Shirin was a better tactician and sword fighter, and Joshua was the best overall fighter, as well as the best outdoorsman. Each of Friede's friends was exceptional in the field they specialized in. In fact, they were probably better than most adults at their respective focuses. Meanwhile, Friede wasn't quite at that level in anything.

However, she is second-best at almost everything. When Yuhette talked about Sonnenlicht ideology, Friede was the only one who could keep up; Shirin and Joshua were completely lost. When Shirin mused about the kinds of defensive strategies the castles they passed along the way might employ in a siege, it was Friede who asked pertinent questions. And when Joshua talked about predicting the weather based on the movements of the clouds, it was Friede who tried to emulate him.

She's solidly second place. And now that I think about it, if these four were all Heavenwatchers, Father would almost certainly choose Friede as their squad leader. Friede was the only one who could properly evaluate the input the other three had on their respective fields. *She would also make for the perfect aide.* Since she was second-best at everything, she could take care of a wide range of tasks, as long as they didn't require a true expert. Plus, she would be able to notice whenever someone who was first-rate at something messed up and cover for them.

I've heard rumors that Veight the Black Werewolf King is similarly well-versed in a number of fields. After observing Friede, Iori could tell those rumors were likely true. Friede had a decent baseline in an extraordinarily large number of fields. *But how does she know so much? She's no genius. Compared to the other three, she's not exceptionally smart or strong, at least as far as I can tell.*

After thinking about it for a bit, Iori finally realized Friede's secret.

I see, it's not that she's particularly talented—she just does her best to learn as much as she can from every expert she comes across. That's what lets her be second-best at everything.

Friede had learned a lot from her friends just by being with them and absorbing their perspectives. She had an insatiable curiosity, and she treated everyone she met with respect. *Shirin has no interest in theology, and Yuhette doesn't care about learning how to fight. Meanwhile, Joshua's more interested in hand-to-hand combat than swordplay. But Friede's curious about it all, so she has a basic understanding of all of these fields. Come to think of it, Friede's the one who paid the most attention to Seiga's teachings as well. She grows simply by meeting new people. Because she doesn't look down on them, and constantly seeks to learn what they're best at. I suspect she'll soon outdo her peers, though it looks like they haven't realized that yet.*

The suffering she'd experienced as a child had forced Iori to cultivate a good eye for people. If she hadn't learned how to judge people, she would have died long ago. Indeed, the only reason she'd agreed to become one of Tokitaka's wards was because she'd determined that she could trust him and the Heavenwatchers with her discerning eye. *I need to make sure my report to father is as accurate as possible.*

Friede laughed at something one of her friends said, and Iori glanced over at her. *I may not like her, but I shouldn't underestimate her.* Iori resolved to keep a close eye on Friede.

Soon enough, the party made their way to Wa's capital.

"Wow, I love the atmosphere of this place!" Friede exclaimed, and Iori smiled a little.

"Lord Ason designed the capital and the streets to interlock and form one big magic circle."

"Oh, I'd read about that. I wonder if that's why it feels so strange standing here?" Friede mused.

"I don't know much about magic, but it does look like an exotic place," Yuhette muttered as she looked around.

“That’s because Wa’s architecture is quite different from the rest of the continent. It was developed in response to the unique climate and geography of the region. Ahh, everything looks so refined. It’s splendid,” Shirin gushed, his tail swishing back and forth.

Iori had heard that the young boy was a big fan of Wa’s culture. Unsurprisingly, Friede was eager to jump into this conversation too.

“Yeah, it’s amazing! The earthen doors suck up all the moisture, so even when it rains the wooden walls don’t get soaked.”

“Yep. We adapt to the climate using the materials we have available to make sure our buildings are pleasant to live in.”

“It’s just like how Rolmund’s roofs are really steeply slanted to keep off the snow.”

“Oh, that’s why?” Shirin asked, cocking his head. He didn’t seem terribly interested in Rolmund’s culture, despite being obsessed with Wa’s.

That’s exactly what sets Friede apart, Iori thought. Shirin knew more about Wa than Friede, but Friede had the breadth of knowledge that allowed her to compare and contrast Wa with Rolmund. *Once she starts traveling the world like the Black Werewolf King, how much will she be able to accomplish?* Iori was beginning to warm up to Friede just a little. At the very least, she was curious whether or not Friede would become the next generation’s Black Werewolf King.

Just then, Iori realized something.

How strange, I didn’t think she would be able to match up to the Black Werewolf King at all when we first met, but now... Iori had initially found Friede incompetent, but the more she observed Friede, the more Iori realized she was wrong.

Iori flushed with embarrassment. *W-Well, I admit she’s open-minded, at least. Even though I was so rude to her, she doesn’t seem to mind at all. But maybe that’s just because she’s an idiot.* Of course, if she were an idiot, she wouldn’t be second-best at everything, so Iori had to accept her inference was likely incorrect.

I really don't want to admit it, but I guess I have to. But even if she could admit it to herself, Iori still couldn't bring herself to praise Friede to her face.

Iori led the group to the Chrysanthemum Court's chamber. The Meraldian envoys had been told it was a diplomatic visit, but the real reason the Chrysanthemum Court had called them over was because they wanted to evaluate whether or not Friede was a suitable successor to Veight. *At first, I thought she wasn't fit to take over at all, but now I think she'll do fine.* It galled Iori that she thought that, but it was her honest assessment.

Friede and the others were brought to the audience hall where the Kushin—the highest-ranking members of the Chrysanthemum Court—waited. Tokitaka, who was the head of the prestigious Mihoshi family, was also a Kushin. Friede greeted them in Wa instead of Meraldian.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Friede Aindorf, daughter of the Commonwealth Councilor, Veight Von Aindorf. Thank you for inviting me to your court."

Good, she didn't mess up her introduction. It was only when she let out a sigh of relief that Iori realized she'd been worried for Friede. Fortunately, Friede's Wa was quite fluent. It was clear she'd been studying for a while.

The Kushin nodded, nostalgic smiles appearing on some of their faces.

"Thank you for taking the time to come here. Please, enjoy your stay in Wa."

"I can see your father in you."

"Your eyes are just like his—full of wisdom."

Friede blushed at all the praise. But Iori knew they were just flattering her to get her to lower her guard around them. *Stay vigilant, Friede.* Worried, she balled her hands into fists. Friede was quite competent, but if the Chrysanthemum Court didn't notice that, it'd be bad for everyone.

One of the Kushin asked, "What do you think of Wa from what you've seen so far?"

"Ah, I think it's a wonderful nation," Friede replied.

Iori nodded to herself. *That's a safe enough response. But the Kushin are going to want more than that.*

Friede seemed to have realized that as well, and she added, "My father has told me a bit about Wa, but the climate and geography were more pleasant than I expected. Other than that, I don't know much, but I'd love to learn more."

Yeah, that's good. Turn your ignorance into a positive by presenting it as curiosity. Plus, this way you don't disappoint them by trying to show off with half-baked knowledge. Iori was calculating all of this, but she knew Friede was probably just saying what she actually felt, instead of trying to come off a certain way. This was precisely why Iori was still worried. Some of the Kushin's smiles grew wider, but the interview was just beginning.

"What is it that you would like to learn more about?"

"Oh, everything! I want to know more about Kogusokujutsu, kimonos, the way the capital's streets were designed—ah, and the sashimi I tried on my way here was delicious. Iori said she'll take me to a sweets shop later, I'm looking forward to that too!"

Don't talk like a child! Iori was flabbergasted. She sounded like a kid who was visiting her uncle. But to Iori's surprise, that elicited a positive reaction from the Kushin.

"If you're visiting a sweets shop, I highly recommend going to the Sweet Cat Cafe. Not only is the food delicious, but you can play with the grimalkin working there as well."

"Wow, that sounds amazing! We don't have many grimalkin in Meraldia, so I'd love to meet some!"

Is it really okay to take the meeting in this direction? Iori couldn't figure out what the Kushin were doing. But after a moment of confusion, she realized what they were up to.

"In that case, why don't we add a grimalkin to your retinue while you're here? Feel free to ask them for anything while you're staying in the capital."

"Wait, really?!"

Wait, that's a trap, Friede! Grimalkin were very hard to manage. They were lazy, uncooperative, and self-centered. Nothing like the loyal canines that served as core members of the demon army.

Friede, however, just smiled and said, "Thank you so much!"

You're making a mistake, Friede! The Kushin want to test whether or not you're capable of getting a grimalkin to listen to you! Unfortunately, lori was just a low-ranking guide and didn't have the authority to speak out during this meeting. All she could do was grit her teeth and watch. The interview was far from over.

"Are you planning on joining the Commonwealth Council or the demon army once you become an adult, Lady Friede?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Seriously?! Even if you don't know, can't you word that better? lori's stomach churned. Friede was too honest for her own good. But she seemed oblivious to her mistakes and plowed on.

"I was taught at school that I should choose a vocation I feel an affinity towards. And that while I'm young, I should broaden my horizons as much as possible so I know what my choices are."

"I see. Hopefully this journey helps expand on that list of options then."

"I'm sure it will!"

Throughout the meeting, Friede's smile never wavered.

That evening, lori went to meet Tokitaka.

"You look tired," he said as she walked into the room.

"I'm fine, sir." Her tone was no-nonsense, and she didn't even glance at the pile of sweets, both Wa and Meraldian, sitting on the table in front of her. She'd gotten used to her adopted father's sweet tooth. "What was the Kushin's evaluation of Friede?"

"Are you that curious?" Tokitaka asked with a knowing smile.

Embarrassed, Iori hurriedly replied, “Not especially. But their decision will affect my mission, so I was hoping to receive a briefing.”

“Of course.” Tokitaka’s smile grew wider, and Iori squirmed uncomfortably. After taking a sip of his warm tea, he said, “The Kushin believe that Friede’s potential is currently unknown.”

“What?!” As someone who’d traveled with Friede and gotten a closer look at her, Iori wasn’t happy with that assessment at all. “Father, Friede is far from incompetent! She may act that way sometimes, but she’s not someone to be taken lightly!”

“Calm down, Iori. I said they consider her potential unknown—meaning we haven’t come to any kind of actual decision.” Tokitaka took a bite out of a steamed bun as he talked. “Ooh, this is chestnut-flavored.” He tore it in half to show Iori the filling. “Look, you can’t even tell what’s in a bun without taking a bite out of it first. You can’t expect to understand the true nature of a person with just a few superficial questions. You need to get to the meat of things. Isn’t that right, Iori?”

“Well...yes, it’s as you say,” Iori said with a relieved nod.

Smiling, Tokitaka added, “That being said, I’ve already made my assessment of Friede. Seeing as she managed to win even you over.”

“Wh-What?!” Iori shouted in surprise. *She hasn’t done anything of the sort!* If anything, Friede was exactly the kind of person Iori couldn’t stand. “I’m simply being nice to her for diplomatic reasons. She’s the daughter of Meraldia’s Demon Lord and her vice-commander, it wouldn’t do to antagonize her. Besides, it’d be dangerous for Wa if we underestimate her potential,” Iori said, speaking quickly. Her words became faster and louder as she went on too. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to give Friede grimalkin servants. They’ll just get in her way. That’s why the Kushin offered to give her one in the first place, isn’t it?!”

“Now, now, calm down. It’s unbecoming for a ninja to yell.” Tokitaka flashed Iori a quick smile, but then his expression turned serious. “If she can’t handle a few grimalkin, then she won’t ever be able to govern Meraldia. That country has so many different demon races living together with humans. A ruler of

Meraldia is expected to deal with far more difficult problems than pacifying some unruly cats.”

“But...” Iori trailed off, unable to think of a valid counterargument. Tokitaka was right.

He smiled again and added, “Now, I imagine if she could win you over, she’ll have no trouble with a few grimalkin. So you don’t have to worry, at least not on that front.”

“How many times do I have to say I don’t like her!”

“Hahahaha!”

Iori was so flustered that she didn’t consider the significance behind Tokitaka saying “at least not on that front.”

A day had passed since Friede’s meeting with the Kushin.

“Good morning! You’re so *cute*!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as she circled around the grimalkin lazing about at their meeting place. There were three of them in total, and they were all wearing kimonos. According to Iori, they were hired by the Chrysanthemum Court to do odd jobs.

“Grimalkin don’t like to work if they can help it, but they make for great receptionists. They don’t look imposing so anyone can approach them, and they’re too lazy to wander off.”

“I see! Oh, I should introduce myself! I’m Friede Aindorf! I look human, but I’m half-werewolf! What are your names?”

The grimalkin scratched their faces and answered.

“I’m Okoge. I’m good at making fires.”

“I’m Nijiru. I like getting wet.”

“I’m Hiboshi. I like sunbathing.”

Still excited, Friede said, “So, the black one’s Okoge, the calico is Nijiru, and the gray one is Hiboshi! Got it!”

“Hey, don’t just sort us by our colors.”

“At least memorize our faces.”

Seeing their annoyance, Friede immediately apologized.

“Sorry, I can’t tell your faces apart. But you guys can’t tell human faces apart, so you understand, right?”

The grimalkin exchanged glances, then nodded.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I wish we could tell people apart by hair color, but so many of them have the same hair.”

“And they change their clothes all the time, so we can’t tell them apart that way either.”

The grimalkin sprawled out on the benches they were sitting on, looking unwilling to do anything. Unable to bear their laziness any longer, Shirin stepped forward.

“You guys are supposed to be our guides, so why are you just loafing around?”

“Yeah. Just cause you’re cute and fluffy, don’t think you can get away with not doing anything,” Joshua added.

“Wait, you think they look cute?” Shirin asked.

“I mean, yeah? They still tick me off though.”

“What’s cute about all that bothersome fur? I don’t understand...”

“Seriously?!”

Friede turned back to the two of them and said, “Shirin’s a dragonkin so he doesn’t get what’s cute about fluffy things. He likes scales more than hair!”

“Huh? Oh...I-I see?” Joshua said hesitantly, cocking his head.

“That’s right. There’s nothing more beautiful than a lustrous, hard scale. Hair and fur seem strange to me. I usually don’t bring it up because I know it’s rude, but I honestly think human hair looks like a rooster’s comb.”

“No way...”

Friede chuckled at Joshua’s surprise. “It’s interesting, right? That’s why

grimalkin don't really like dragonkin too. Their ultimate weapon, their cuteness, doesn't work on them."

Okoge and the others' ears perked up when Friede said that.

"Sheesh, don't tell me you knew that from the beginning?"

"This is gonna be rough..."

"I'm more scared of this Friede girl than that dragonkin boy to be honest."

The three grimalkin sighed as they got to their feet.

"Well, whatever. Come on, we'll show you around the city."

"Yaaay! Thanks, guys!" Friede bounced up and down with excitement, then bowed to the grimalkin.

Following Okoge's lead, Friede explored the city.

"Wa's capital is protected by a moat as well as walls," Okoge explained in a monotone voice as they walked. "None of the other cities in the country have these kinds of fortifications, but I hear every city does in Meraldia."

Friede nodded. "Yep. Or, well, we have walls but moats are pretty rare. And the few cities with them only have dry moats."

"Why's that?" Nijiru asked, cocking his head.

"Water's too valuable to use on a moat. Meraldia gets a lot less rain than Wa."

"Huh, I see." Nijiru nodded, then asked, "Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah, tons!" Friede exclaimed, unfurling the paper in her hands. "I made this map of the city while we were walking and—"

"You sketched out a map without permission?!" Iori interjected, shocked. She hurried over and examined Friede's map. "Maps are vital intel! You can't just make one without telling anyone, that's a crime!"

"I told you just now, didn't I?"

“That’s not the problem—I’m impressed you managed to make such a detailed map while walking around.”

In a proud voice, Shirin said, “I was the one who drew it, actually. Incidentally, I have a far better mental image of this city’s layout than what’s on that piece of paper—so if making a map like that is already a problem, I don’t think I’ll be allowed to go home.”

“Oh...”

Friede smiled at Iori and said, “Dragonkin have amazing memories.”

“We’re only good at remembering things exactly as we see, hear, or read them though. It’s why dragonkin art is highly technical and not appreciated by most other races. We don’t make emotional connections with our memories.”

“That’s not really important right now...”

Iori wasn’t sure what to do anymore, but Yuhette smiled gently at her and said, “I know for a fact that the Meraldian Commonwealth Council has more accurate maps of Wa’s capital than this, and that the Chrysanthemum Court possesses a similarly detailed map of Ryunheit. We’re allies, so it shouldn’t be a problem to share information this basic, I don’t think.”

“You...have a point. I suppose it’s fine...”

After getting Iori’s reluctant agreement, Friede turned back to Nijiru.

“Anyway, there’s something strange I’ve noticed while walking around. Everyone seems to be heading in the same direction.”

“Oh?” Nijiru said in a monotone voice, but Hiboshi seemed interested in Friede’s observation.

“Well spotted, miss. You’re right, most people are going in the same direction. How did the explanation go again... Oh yeah, in order to prevent traffic, all the busy locations like official government buildings and market squares were put in predetermined locations when the city was built.”

“Huh?” Friede tilted her head to one side.

Joshua didn’t seem too interested in the topic at hand, so he said, “You look like you don’t really get it, but it’s not that important so who cares, right?”

“Well, if all you wanted to do was to keep the flow of traffic smooth, you’d put the busiest places at the edge of the city. And then you could separate the other important places by district, like make a government district, a craftsmen’s district, and all that, right?”

“Uhh...I don’t really know or care,” Joshua said with a dismissive wave of his hand, but Friede was still pondering the problem.

“The flow of people is almost like the flow of mana through a magic circle... I wonder if people just walking the streets like this can make something happen.”

“Can they, Lady Iori?” Shirin asked, but Iori shook her head.

“That I don’t know. I’m afraid I’m not a mage. But I have read that our founder, the legendary sage Ason, was a wise man. It’s entirely possible he designed the city to do just that.”

Okoge sprawled out on a nearby bench and let out a long yawn. “Fwaaah, can’t you discuss academics after we’re done touring the city? I wanna get going.”

“That works for me. Lead the way, Okoge!”

“Hey, wait! Come on, don’t pull!”

Friede rolled up her map and dragged Okoge down the street with her.

—Iori’s Observations—

“Now that’s a surprise...” Okoge muttered to himself as he rolled a ball of gunpowder around in his fingers. “That girl’s more than meets the eye. She picked up on a lot just by walking around town.”

“Yeah, she’d make for a good ninja. I bet the Heavenwatchers would love to have her,” Hiboshi, the gray-furred cat, said.

Iori folded her arms and said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Who would want someone like her in the Heavenwatchers?”

“I would, for one. She’s one of the only people I’ve met who didn’t treat us like dumb animals on our first meeting. No one else has shown us that kind of respect. There aren’t many people like her out there,” Nijiru said. “Are you jealous, Iori?” he added with a grin.

“No!”

Iori shouted louder than she'd meant to, and she hurriedly covered her mouth. They needed to be discreet. Right now, the group was taking a break, and Friede and her friends were eating lunch a short distance away. They seemed to be excited by the taste and texture of udon, which didn't exist in Meraldia. To Iori's surprise, all three of them had mastered the use of chopsticks with relative ease.

“A-Anyway...” Iori turned back to glare at the grimalkin. “No one told me the three musketeers were going to be assigned to Friede. What do you plan on doing to her?”

“Don't worry, we're not gonna set her on fire or anything,” Okoge said with a chuckle. “She's an important guest, right?” His eyes focused on the ball of gunpowder he was playing with.

“Hey, stop playing with that. You'll get it damp,” Nijiru said, snatching it out of his hands. “We're just following our master's orders. Once that's done with, we're going to leave.”

“And what orders are those?” Hiboshi asked, looking up from polishing his grappling hook and smiling.

“I'm afraid not even you have the clearance to know the details of our mission. Oh, but our boss did say we're doing this to determine whether or not Friede really has what it takes to lead a nation or something.”

“Ah, I see...”

These grimalkin had become ninjas mostly out of curiosity; they didn't dwell too deeply on the true intentions behind the missions they were assigned. That was precisely why the Heavenwatchers valued them though. *Why did father...or rather, why did the Kushin bring these guys in? There are only three members of the secret grimalkin squad attached to the Heavenwatchers, and they're all here.* Grimalkin got bored of things easily and were quite lazy, so training them to be ninjas wasn't easy. When the Heavenwatchers had first tried recruiting grimalkin to join their ranks, half hadn't even shown up for the first day of training. And by the end of the training course, only Okoge, Nijiru, and Hiboshi had remained.

Father said he'd already made up his mind about Friede. Which means this must be the work of the other Kushin. What exactly are they thinking? Iori knew she wouldn't learn anything more by worrying about it, so she decided to put it out of her mind for now.

"I'm going to continue my mission of observing and assessing Friede while guiding her. That's fine, right?"

"Sure. We're working for the same boss as you, so we've got no reason to fight." Okoge tried to sound cool as he said that, but his eyes were constantly following the gunpowder ball, so the effect fell flat. "Come on, give it back already. I'm your leader, remember?"

"Wait, I'm the leader."

"Aren't I the leader?"

Iori knew they'd be arguing for ages once they got started, so she got to her feet. *These guys are giving me a headache... Maybe I'll go spend some more time staring at Friede's face to calm down.*

"Udon's delicious!" Friede exclaimed, before slurping up her noodles in the traditional Wa way. "How do noodles taste so much better when you eat them like this?! Shirin, you try it too!"

"I'm afraid I have to pass. Dragonkin mouths aren't really suited to slurping."

Shirin wrapped his noodles around his chopsticks into a small ball and ate them in one bite.

Meanwhile, Yuhette looked hesitant. She muttered, "It just doesn't feel right to eat so noisily..."

"Hm? Seems fine to me," Joshua said casually, slurping so fast that the soup flecked his cheeks. "Damn this is good! I can't believe they made a soup this delicious with just beans, fish, and seaweed!"

"Really?" Shirin asked, cocking his head. Unlike Joshua, his mouth was completely clean.

A sudden revelation hit Friede. "I get it now! The whole point of slurping the noodles is so you get the soup with it! That's why it's tastier this way!"

“I see, that does make sense,” Yuhette said with a nod, and scooped up some soup and a few noodles with her spoon.

“You’re right, the taste really improves when you eat the noodles with the soup.”

“Let me try,” Shirin said, putting down his chopsticks and picking up a spoon instead.

Just then, lori came over and sat down, a tired look on her face.

“One small udon, please,” she said to the waiter, who promptly assembled the order.

“Are you okay, lori? Do you want some of my tofu?” Friede asked worriedly.

“No, I’m fine,” she replied with a sigh, and began eating her udon. Shirin and Yuhette began whispering to each other as they watched her eat.

“See, she’s slurping them too...”

“I guess that really is the proper way to eat your noodles.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to just make the soup stickier so it clings to the noodles even if you don’t slurp?”

“It’s easier to slurp than to change up the recipe, I guess?”

Friede could smell irritation coming off of lori, so in an attempt to distract her she said, “U-Udon’s pretty tasty, right?”

Frowning, lori replied, “I’m not a fan.”

“Really?”

“It’s not that I dislike the taste of udon, it just brings back bad memories.”

Friede leaned forward and asked in a curious voice, “Like what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

lori finished up her noodles and wiped her mouth. Just then, Okoge and the other grimalkin came over.

“Have you finished your lunch, Friede?” he asked.

“Yep! The udon here is delicious! All of your recommendations have been

spot-on, Okoge! Thanks a lot!”

Friede bowed, a bright smile on her face.

“Glad to hear it.” Hiboshi nodded in contentment. “We’re pretty picky about our food, so we know all the best spots in town. Anyway...” Hiboshi cleared his throat. “There’s some work we need to do for the Chrysanthemum Court, so is it all right if Iori takes over for the rest of the day?”

“That’s fine by me. Though it’s a shame—I wanted to talk to you guys for longer.”

Okoge and the others were the first grimalkin friends Friede had made.

Nijiru smiled and said, “Sorry. It’s an important job, so we can’t put it off.”

Friede’s curiosity was piqued. She asked, “What kind of job is it?”

“Well, it’s a pretty dangerous one. I’d bring you guys along, but we’d get scolded if any of you got hurt.”

That wasn’t enough to sate Friede. “Is it something you have to keep secret from foreigners?”

“Nah, it’s nothing like that. There are just a few unruly grimalkin that we need to teach a lesson to.” Okoge let out a deep sigh. “Basically, we’ve gotta take care of some bandits. There are only three of us though, so we gotta be careful.”

“Heh, now that’s a first. Okoge acting cautious,” Hiboshi said with a chuckle, and Okoge rounded on him.

“Hey, if there were three copies of me, we’d be fine. You and Nijiru aren’t good fighters, though, so I’ve gotta be careful.”

“Excuse me? You’re useless without us!” Nijiru snapped back.

“Yeah?! Well, you always get your gunpowder wet, and you spill all your oil too!”

The three of them looked like they were about to start a catfight, so Friede butted in.

“Why don’t you let me help then?”

“Huh?!” everyone, including Friede’s friends, exclaimed.

“I mean, you’ve been great guides and all, so I want to repay you,” Friede said cheerfully. “Plus, Meraldia and Wa are allies.”

Yuhette gave Friede a troubled look. “That’s...true, but...”

Shirin stepped forward as she trailed off. “That’s exactly why you can’t go, Friede. If anything happened to you, Lady Iori and these three grimalkin would be held responsible.”

“I know, but can Okoge and his friends really take care of this by themselves?” Friede turned around, directing her question at Iori.

Iori shifted awkwardly and replied, “I’m not sure. The Chrysanthemum Court takes confidentiality very seriously, so I don’t know the capabilities or the missions of its other members.”

Friede could tell from Iori’s scent that something was afoot. Even if the words Iori spoke were strictly the truth, a werewolf could tell what a human’s intentions were by their scent.

Knowing Iori, she’s probably not lying outright, but she does feel guilty about something. Why’s that? Unlike most werewolves, Friede understood humans pretty well, so she could read more into the scents that she picked up than others. But that didn’t mean she understood everything. For example, Friede still couldn’t tell why Iori felt guilty.

“Hmm...” Friede debated whether it was better to back down or to insist on helping out. *I think if it was really too dangerous for me to go, Iori would put her foot down.* Coming to a decision, Friede said, “In that case, I’ll come along. If the situation gets too dangerous, just tell me, and I’ll turn back.”

“Gotcha,” Hiboshi said casually, and his comrades nodded in agreement.

Unable to hide her confusion, Iori sighed. “In that case, I’m coming too.”

“Thanks!” Friede said with a smile.

—Iori’s Observations—

Okoge led Friede and her friends to a small mountain a short distance from the capital.

“I’ve heard that when Lord Ason founded this country, he cared a lot about the positions of the mountains and rivers,” he said. “When he first met the grimalkin, he also told us where the best places to live would be.”

“Is that why even you grimalkin respect Lord Ason?” Friede asked.

“More or less. If it wasn’t for him, we probably would have died out ages ago.”

The group made their way up the mountain slope, which was shaded by a copse of trees. They were following a rough path that seemed to get little foot traffic.

“I see,” Friede said, plucking a leaf off a nearby tree and twirling it in her hands.

Shirin snatched it away from her and said, “Stop playing around, Friede. You need to stay alert.”

“Do I really look that careless to you?”

You do, Iori thought to herself with a sigh. Friede seemed to be paying attention to her conversation with the grimalkin, but not to her surroundings.

Joshua grabbed the leaf from Shirin and said, “It’s fine, we’re here to protect her, so Friede can just take it easy, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Yuhette said, taking the leaf from Joshua. She looked it over, then handed it back to Friede and said in a serious tone, “If we end up slowing Okoge and the others down, it’ll defeat the purpose of coming here to help.”

“You don’t have to take it that seriously, really,” Okoge said in a casual voice. “Anyway, as I was saying...”

Before he could continue with his story, Hiboshi took over. “So thanks to Lord Ason, none of our villages had to worry about floods, landslides, or other natural disasters. The humans even used our villages as guideposts for where to build their roads.”

“It worked out pretty well since they gave us money to let them use the houses that were otherwise sitting vacant. We even got to make tourist attractions out of the Danda Mound and stuff,” Nijiru added with a grin. “You

know about the Danda Mound?”

“Oh, I saw it in a play back home. It’s the place where the nue was buried, right? The name was a bit different in the play, though, to honor the fallen Danda.”

Hiboshi smiled. “Haha, I should have figured you’d know. Your old man was the one who killed it, after all.”

“Well, dad didn’t think it was that big of a deal, so—” Friede cut off abruptly and grabbed Hiboshi’s head. “Stop.”

“Nuwah?!”

The rest of the party came to a halt as well, and Shirin and Joshua stood protectively in front of Friede. Iori drew a pistol from her jacket. It was loaded, though the fuse hadn’t been attached yet.

So she noticed the ambush... Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised when it’s so crudely put together.

Joshua looked down and muttered, “What a crappy pitfall trap... Are they even trying to hide it?”

Iori had of course noticed the pitfall as well. Not only was the dirt around it a different color, but a *very* conspicuous pile of leaves was sitting right on top of it. It was exceedingly obvious something was hidden underneath it. As Joshua had said, it was a “crappy trap.”

Friede stared at it and said, “That’s probably not a real pitfall.”

Correct. Iori nodded along.

Friede explained, “The real goal of this obvious trap is to get us to stop here.”

An astute observation. I knew I wasn’t wrong in my assessment of you.

Iori felt simultaneously proud of Friede, and also annoyed that she thought so highly of her. She’d never had such contradictory feelings before. *Whatever, now isn’t the time to worry about that.* As Friede had said, whoever set this trap had done so to stall the party here. And they’d succeeded.

After a few seconds, Friede shouted, “Here they come!”

“Waaah!” Okoge screamed as Friede grabbed him and flung him out of the way. As he careened into a nearby thicket, Friede ducked low, and something flew inches over her head, tearing through her hair.

“Oww!”

“Friede!” Shirin shouted, drawing his sword and cutting at what looked to be empty air. “I felt that I hit something!”

“Mwah?!” A panicked voice shouted from above Friede. It had the distinct high pitch of a grimalkin.

“You little—” Joshua transformed and let out a ferocious howl.

“GRAAAAAAGH!”

“Waaah!” a few more grimalkin squealed from the trees overhead.

“Oh, there are more of them than I thought. Hey, Okoge, can we—huh?” Friede glanced around, confused. “Where did Okoge and the others go?”

Iori pulled out a fuse and attached it to her pistol as she said, “They’re handling things their way.”

“Uh...okay?” After a moment, realization dawned on Friede, and she gave Iori a wry smile. “We’re the bait, aren’t we?”

Shirin turned to her and shouted, “This isn’t the time for a discussion, Friede! We’re outnumbered!”

“This is awkward. Grimalkin are so cute. I’ll feel bad fighting them...” Friede muttered.

Readying her pistol to fire, Iori stared at Friede’s back. *This is likely Friede’s first time fighting grimalkin. Their cuteness might make things hard for her, but they’re not an opponent you can beat while pulling punches. What are you going to do, Friede?*

Almost as if Friede had read Iori’s mind, she grinned and said, “But that doesn’t mean I’m gonna hold back. Let’s take ’em all out!”

And how are you going to do that? Before Iori could ask aloud, Friede vanished.

“Huh?!”

Iori was only able to assess that Friede had leapt up by all the leaves falling from the shaking branches. *What's she planning on doing?* Friede's comrades appeared to be used to this technique of hers, and they all ducked low to the ground.

Yuhette sidled over to Iori and whispered, “Friede's about to unleash a big attack. Get down.”



“Wait, what do you mean?!” lori didn’t quite get what was going on, but she followed everyone else and dropped to the ground.

A second later, Friede screamed, “SOUL SHAKER!”

“Wh-What?!”

Friede’s howl felt like it ripped through lori’s soul. The mana in the area began swirling into a vortex, creating a powerful current even lori could see—despite the fact that she still wasn’t any good at prediction magic. lori felt a chill in her bones, and the mana in her body was disrupted, making it difficult for her to stand.

Was that magic?! The Heavenwatchers had plenty of mages, but lori knew nothing about using magic in combat. Since she didn’t have any way of fixing the flow of mana inside her, all she could do was wait for the effect to wear off. But while she could withstand the mana disturbance, the same didn’t hold true for Friede’s enemies.

“Nyooo!” Grimalkin started dropping from branches, their bodies numb. Nets and grappling hooks fell from their hands.

So those were the weapons they were using, lori thought. That makes sense. Grimalkin don’t have the strength to outright overpower humans, so nets and hooks to hinder people’s movement are more effective.

As the grimalkin hit the ground, Shirin and Joshua pointed their weapons at them.

“Don’t move.”

“Not like we could...even if we wanted to...”

Shirin had expected as much, and he began briskly tying up the brigands. Since Friede had aimed her howl upwards, the people on the ground hadn’t been too badly affected. For all that, lori was still off-balance, but could at least still move. *So that’s a werewolf’s howl. It’s pretty powerful.* lori had heard that werewolf howls were laced with mana and instilled fear into the hearts of men and beasts.

“That was a smart strategy,” lori said to Friede as she helped Shirin tie the

grimalkin up.

Smiling, Yuhette handed the leaf they'd been passing around to Iori. "That's because we discussed it in secret using this."

Iori looked down and saw Meraldian words hastily scrawled onto the surprisingly large leaf.

"I smell grimalkin. Lots of them. Likely in the trees. I'll unleash a Soul Shaker."

"They're probably waiting until we're past the first of them to pincer us."

"If we want to capture all of them, it's probably best to pretend to fall for their trap."

"Sounds good. Wait until they show themselves before doing that magic thing again, Friede."

Iori stared at the leaf in awe.

When did they manage to write all that?! Did I miss it because I was paying too much attention to the upcoming ambush?! It's a genius move because it's hard to spot words on a leaf, and Wa's grimalkin don't know Meraldian anyway. Iori had assumed Friede's friends were just sheltered students, but she was forced to accept they were quite capable as well. Their education had clearly prepared them for more than just the classroom.

Still smiling, Yuhette added, "A werewolf's howl freezes humans and beasts with fear. Thanks to the technique Friede learned from her father, she can amplify its effects, and on some level, choose *who* it affects."

"I see."

I read about this in the Heavenwatchers' documents. The Black Werewolf King's howl only ever seemed to harm his enemies. If Friede truly had mastered such a fearsome skill, it would be nigh impossible to defeat her in a battle. Even if a hundred soldiers attacked her, she could just stop them all and take them out at her leisure. *She's insanely strong...*

Iori watched as Friede finished tying up the last grimalkin with a smile.

"Y-You're really tying us cute, innocent creatures up?" one of them asked.

“Yep.”

Friede looked gentle, but she had no mercy towards her enemies.

“You don’t feel bad about tying up such cute grimalkin?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, come on, meow. Just because that works on Wa people, don’t expect it to work on foreigners,” another of them said.

“But what else can we do?”

Friede tied them up in pairs, thus making it harder for them to run away. *Is she that merciless to the grimalkin despite how cute they are because she’s half-werewolf?* Iori had spent a lot of time during her shinobi training working up a resistance to grimalkin, gaining the mental fortitude to attack even cute things if they were dangerous. However, she doubted Friede had undergone similarly harsh training. Considering how excited Friede had been over Okoge’s cute gestures, Iori thought Friede wouldn’t have lasted five minutes as a ninja.

Unable to break free, the grimalkin started shaking—but it was hard to tell whether it was from fear or from indignation.

“That girl has some weird screams. She can’t be human.”

“It’s not fair, bringing along a girl like her!”

“Or that scaly monster boy either!”

Iori pointed her pistol at them and let out a long sigh. In a quiet voice she said, “You failed your shinobi training. Do you really think any of you would stand a chance against a werewolf or a dragonkin? Morons.”

Suddenly, Friede cut into the conversation. “So these guys are all failed shinobi?”

“Wha?!” Iori yelped in surprise.

“I figured grimalkin would have a hard time sticking with ninja training. Did they all run away?”

How good is your hearing? Realizing she couldn’t keep it a secret any longer, Iori decided to come clean.

“That’s right. Okoge and his friends are the only exceptions. The rest of the grimalkin all gave up and ran off halfway through their training. The Heavenwatchers gave up on trying to train grimalkin ninjas after that.”

“So where are Okoge and the others now?”

A second later there was a muffled *boom* in the distance.

“Somewhere over there,” lori said dryly.

“It looks like something’s burning that way.”

“Probably their hideout.”

lori couldn’t say for certain, but she suspected Okoge’s mission had been to find these bandits’ hideout and destroy it.

“They really did just use us as bait,” Friede said with a small laugh, and Shirin sighed.

“This is no laughing matter. What kind of person uses foreign students as bait to wipe out bandits? We should lodge an official complaint.”

“Yeah, we should lodge a complaint!” It wasn’t Friede, Yuhette, or Joshua who said that.

“Who’s there?” Friede turned around, and saw a new grimalkin come out of the thicket.

“Face justice, you evil bandits!”

“That’s our line,” Shirin said with another sigh, moving to cover Friede.

Naturally, the grimalkin didn’t listen. “I’m not gonna show you evil humans any mercy! Take *this*!”

Something shot out of the thicket with a distinctive *thump*. lori recognized the sound immediately. *That’s a net shot. I can’t believe these guys stole the Heavenwatchers’ prototype equipment.* Net shots were wrapped nets that could be fired from a catapult or a large rifle to entangle foes at a distance. They unraveled after they were shot, but because of how much effort they took to load, and how bad their aim was, they weren’t very practical.

No way that’ll work on a werewolf. But just then, lori noticed something

strange. *Why isn't the net opening?! Is it defective, or did these grimalkin just not maintain it properly?* The net shot sailed through the air over everyone's heads. Because the net was tied together with a couple of dense stones, it was almost as heavy as a small child.

Realizing the danger, Friede ran over to protect the tied-up grimalkin. She had her hands raised over her head to bat away the net.

That'll only work if the net opens. Watch out, Friede, you'll get hit in the face if it doesn't!

Iori dashed forward, shouting, "Stop!"

"Huh?!" To Iori's surprise, Friede really did stop in her tracks. Unfortunately, she was directly in front of the closed net.

"Wait! Get out of the way!"

"Whi—"

Friede had probably meant to ask "Which is it?" but she didn't get a chance to.

"Uryaaah!" Iori barreled into Friede, shoving her out of the way.

Of course, that put her directly in the path of the closed net. *This isn't good.* She wouldn't be able to dodge it. And since she'd pitched forward to push Friede out of the way, she couldn't properly defend herself either. She was about to take a direct hit to the head. The imminent threat of death froze Iori's veins, and her vision went dark. She felt herself tumble to the ground.

Wait, it doesn't hurt? Iori had heard stories about how all pain vanished in the moment before death. Presumably, because the dead couldn't feel pain. It seemed the stories were true, since Iori felt nothing at all. *Man, what a pathetic way to die...* There were so many things she had left unfinished. In fact, Iori was even regretting the fact that she hadn't had more time to talk to Friede.

Come to think of it, I died protecting you, Friede. You owe me now. She smiled. *It feels really...warm? And soft. And it smells nice.*

It was at that point that Iori noticed something. *Wait, I'm not dead?*

"Yep, you're not dead," Friede said, from surprisingly close by.

“Hwaah?!” lori screamed. She was surprised by how high-pitched her voice came out, but that was far from the biggest surprise. Opening her eyes, she realized that she was nestled in Friede’s arms.

“Are you okay, lori?”

“I, I, I’m— I’m fine! Totally fine!” Suddenly suspicious, lori asked, “Wait, how could you tell what I was thinking?”

“I mean, you were saying it all aloud,” Friede replied with a smile, and put lori down. A second later she grimaced and muttered, “Oww...”

“That was reckless, Friede,” Shirin said with a sigh as he sheathed his blade. “Lady lori pushed you out of harm’s way, so why did you forcibly jump back in to grab her? Just because you’re half-werewolf doesn’t mean you can ignore the laws of physics.”

“I mean, I can’t ignore them, that’s why I ended up like this,” Friede said, pointing to the blood dripping from her forehead.

Yuhette looked uncharacteristically afraid as she ran over to Friede. “I’m worried about that head wound of course, but how about your back? You took a direct hit there, you know!”

“Don’t worry, I look human, but my body’s as sturdy as a werewolf’s. I’m fine.” Friede flashed Yuhette a smile, then turned back to the thicket. “Which is why I’m not letting you *get away*.”

“Nyowah?!”

There was a gruesome-sounding crunch, and another group of grimalkin tumbled out of the thicket. Joshua had just finished crushing the mini-catapult that had fired the net.

“How dare you hurt Friede, you bastards! I’m gonna kill you!”

“Waaah!”

The grimalkin began shivering in fear, and Friede stalked over to them.

“If you don’t surrender, we might really have to kill you.”

“D-D-Do your worst!”

Despite their trembling, the grimalkin did their best to look defiant.

“I bet you could never kill anything as cute as us!”

“Oh, do you really think I’d hesitate to kill grimalkin?”

Friede casually kicked at the grass in front of the grimalkin. The ground suddenly went bare, and blades of grass danced in the air.

“Hm?”

“What did you just do?”

“The grass! She cut the grass with her foot!”

Friede’s foot had moved so fast that even the grimalkin, with their exceptional kinetic vision, hadn’t seen the kick. When they realized what had happened, the grimalkin scrambled backwards.

“Nyooooooooo!”

“Well?” Friede’s voice was gentle, but the blood streaming down her face made her look terrifying.

The grimalkin prostrated themselves before her.

“We’re sorry!”

“We surrender!”

“Please don’t kill us!”

Friede gave them a ghastly smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t!”

Iori watched on in dumbfounded amazement. *I almost forgot. All demons have one cardinal rule. The weak follow the strong, and in doing so, avoid being killed.*

During that entire exchange, Friede had shown how much stronger she was than the grimalkin. Upon discovering that their one advantage, their cuteness, didn’t work on her, the grimalkin knew they stood no chance. That was why they’d surrendered. *But to think they’d beg for their lives so fast... Well, either way, attending to Friede’s injuries comes first.* Before Iori had a chance to though, a group of masked men suddenly showed up out of seemingly nowhere.

“Well done, Lady Friede,” one of them said in a low voice. He was wearing dark brown clothes, made to blend in with the forest.

“We’re members of the Heavenwatchers. The Chrysanthemum Court ordered us to assist you. Please allow us to take over from here.”

Iori recognized that voice. The man was one of the Heavenwatchers’ captains. Most of the higher-ranking members of the group could use prediction magic. *Did they send people in when they used prediction magic and realized this would happen, or did they predict this outcome from the very start without needing to rely on magic?* Iori didn’t know enough about the Heavenwatchers yet to say for sure which it was.

Friede didn’t seem at all surprised by their arrival, and she bowed to them. “Thank you for your help.”

Nothing fazes her, does it? Then again, she probably noticed they were here from their smell. Iori was once again reminded how superhuman Friede was.

“These faces match the ones on the wanted posters. Are any of them missing?” the captain asked.

“No, sir. The three musketeers took care of the ones who remained at the hideout.”

“Good. Take them away.” The captain directed his men to start rounding up the captured grimalkin.

Friede glanced briefly over at them, then asked, “What’s going to happen to these grimalkin now?”

“Well...”

The captain’s reluctance was clear even through his mask.

After a few seconds, he cleared his throat and said, “My apologies, I almost forgot werewolves can sniff out lies. Traditionally, the punishment for runaway ninjas has always been death.”

“Wha?!”

The grimalkin had been letting themselves be herded away, but now they all stiffened.

“Hang on a second!”

“Y-You can’t kill us for just a bit of stealing!”

“We didn’t even murder anyone!”

“Yeah! We just captured them with nets and stole their money and food!”

“That’s small-time, right?!”

“Shut up!” the Heavenwatchers captain barked, quieting their protests.

“When you first came under our tutelage, we said if you ever used these skills for personal gain you would be executed!”

“How were we supposed to remember all those stuffy rules!”

“It’s because you didn’t listen that you’re in this mess!”

Some of the other ninjas were beginning to yell at the grimalkin as well. Iori understood how they felt. The Heavenwatchers learned many things during their strict training, including prediction magic. But they were instilled to never use their skills outside of missions.

That was why they had to enter cities through gates like everyone else even though they could scale walls with ease, and why they had to run when confronted by a drunk belligerent instead of putting them in their place. Likewise, they weren’t allowed to use prediction magic to scam people out of their money in gambling dens. And yet, these grimalkin had used the skills they’d learned to rob people, of all things. Most of the Heavenwatchers probably wanted to rip them limb from limb this instant.

Even I want to kill these hooligans. They hurt Friede, despite being a guest of the Chrysanthemum Court. Of course, Iori knew she couldn’t go on a vigilante killing spree in front of that same guest—especially since Friede and the others were from Meraldia, where following the law mattered a lot more.

The captain cleared his throat again and said in a respectful voice, “I’m terribly sorry that you had to witness the shame of the Heavenwatchers. We will take responsibility and punish these bandits accordingly, so please don’t think too badly of the organization as a whole.”

However, Friede wasn’t at all happy with this resolution. “H-Hold on a

second! I promised these guys I would kill them if they didn't surrender!"

"Then there's no problem, is there? You'll kill them if they don't surrender, but you never said you wouldn't if they did. So even though they surrendered, they'll still die."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Friede hurriedly shook her head and bowed to the captain. "I know I don't have any authority in Wa. But won't you please grant them some leniency?"

"Lady Friede Aindorf." The captain's voice was calm, but he looked far more imposing than he had a second ago. In a quiet voice, he said, "This is Wa's affair."

"I'm aware of that. But I'm the one who captured them."

Yuhette jumped in to support Friede. "If it becomes public knowledge that Meraldia's students were harmed in a battle with ruffians in Wa, it may become a diplomatic issue. I think it would be best to keep this a private affair rather than making it official."

"That certainly is true, Lady Yuhette. We are at fault for allowing your party to get injured."

Iori was confused by how easily the captain backed down. Higher-ranking members of the Heavenwatchers were skilled negotiators in their own right, and they knew a good deal about foreign affairs. Their primary mission was gathering intel from neighboring nations, after all.

While Iori was still trying to puzzle out what was going on, the captain turned back to Friede.

"Very well, Lady Friede. But would you please tell us why you wish for us to give these grimalkin clemency?"

Again, the captain's tone was gentle, but it did nothing to hide how intimidating he looked. He was clearly treating Friede as an equal rather than a child. Even Iori was a little scared of him now, but Friede looked as cheerful as ever.

"It's dishonorable to kill someone who fought you with no intention to kill."

“I see. That is a valid reason.” The captain nodded, then asked, “But what of the fact that they broke one of the Heavenwatchers’ most important laws? Wouldn’t it be wrong to spare them their punishment when others have been executed for less?”

“Hmm...” Friede seemed unsure how to respond, so Yuhette came in with another assist.

“Meraldia’s werewolves have a law not to kill anyone who has surrendered to them,” she said.

“Oho. Is that true, Lady Friede?”

Friede nodded immediately. “Yeah, we do.”

Sounds fishy to me... Iori knew Friede well enough now to be able to tell that Friede was lying.

But before the captain could cast any doubt on Friede’s claims, Yuhette added, “It was Friede who actually risked her life to capture these bandits, so would it not be fair to value her customs over your own in this instance?”

“I suppose it would impugn your honor to execute them now,” the captain replied.

Was this captain always this reasonable? Iori couldn’t tell why he was being so amenable. If he wanted to, the captain could probably convince Friede to let him have his way, but he was giving up surprisingly easily. At the same time, he seemed to be observing Friede intently.

“Lady Friede. If, ultimately, we decide not to respect your werewolves’ customs and execute these grimalkin anyway, what will you do?”

“Is there anything I could do in that situation?” Friede asked blankly, and Iori’s jaw dropped open.

What do you mean “is there anything I could do”?! she mentally quipped. *You could tear your way through the Heavenwatchers if you wanted! One howl and we’d all be mincemeat!*

Shirin must have been thinking the same thing, since he muttered, “He’s asking if you would use force to get what you want.”

“No, that wouldn’t work,” Friede said simply. She met the captain’s gaze and said, “I wouldn’t resort to violence, but I might try and get in your way through other means.”

Amused, the captain asked, “Oho... And pray tell what ‘means’ those would be?”

“Come now, I can’t give away all my secrets,” Friede said with a laugh and a casual wave of her hand.

Knowing this girl, she’s got all sorts of crazy tricks up her sleeve...

But then Friede’s expression turned serious, and Iori felt a chill run down her spine.

“Besides, I have another reason to want to keep these grimalkin alive.”

“And that is?”

Picking her words carefully, Friede explained, “I’ve heard that grimalkin don’t make for good soldiers or officials because they’re not very cooperative. But of course, I realize that’s just a stereotype, and that there are plenty of amazing grimalkin like Okoge out there.”

“I’m glad you think so highly of our comrade.”

Scratching the back of her head, Friede added, “The reason you recruited so many grimalkin in the first place was because you were looking for talent like Okoge and his friends, right? After all, it’s not like you could have seen from the start which grimalkin would be useful members and which wouldn’t.”

“Well, ultimately, yes,” the captain said with a nod. “The only way to see if someone is fit to be a ninja is to watch how they handle the training.”

Friede clenched her fists. “In that case, you *needed* those grimalkin who dropped out. My dad—the Black Werewolf King—always says that those who aren’t chosen, those who fail, are just as important as those who succeed. If geniuses are only one in a thousand, then you need a thousand normal people before a genius can be born.”

“I see, so that’s one of the Black Werewolf King’s teachings.” The captain nodded again, impressed. “Those certainly are words befitting a wise man.”

Friede briefly glanced back at the grimalkin, then returned her gaze to the captain and said, "In order to get the skilled grimalkin Heavenwatchers that you have now, you needed to test all of these guys as well. In a way, you owe them a debt."

"Hmm... That's a rather strange argument to make, but I can't help but admit you present a strong case," the captain said hesitantly.

I feel like he's not his usual self, but either way, it looks like one more push should do it. Iori unconsciously stepped forward, and before she knew it she was addressing the captain.

"Sir, I tried to rescue Lady Friede from danger, but as a result, I simply got in her way and needed to be rescued myself. Her injuries are my fault. In the same way that the Heavenwatchers owe the grimalkin a debt, I owe a debt to Lady Friede. Please take that into consideration as well." She gave the captain a deep bow.

Though she was one of Tokitaka's adopted children, she was still an apprentice, and therefore not someone who could casually address a captain. However, the captain didn't reprimand her for her rudeness.

"I saw that as well. Failing to protect Lord Tokitaka's daughter was a failure on our part. In that sense, the Heavenwatchers as a whole owe Lady Friede a debt." Nodding, the captain gestured at Iori. "Very well, I give you permission to handle this incident as you see fit, Lady Iori. Everyone! Pull back!"

"Yes, sir!"

The captain's men were out of sight in seconds. Iori glanced around in surprise, and by the time she turned back to the captain, he was gone as well. *I'm in charge now?*

The grimalkin let out a collective sigh of relief and collapsed to the floor.

"Are they gone?"

"W-We're saved, right?"

"That was super scary."

Friede walked over to a nearby tree and looked up.

“Captain, this means lori gets to decide their fate, right?”

“Please, you’re ruining the impact of our exit.”

Oh, so that’s where they were hiding. lori couldn’t see through the stealth of a master ninja, but Friede clearly could. There was no human who could escape from a werewolf’s nose.

“They’re still there?!” the grimalkin shouted in unison before jumping to their feet.

“Yeah, about half of them,” Friede said with a smile. “Isn’t that right?”

“You’re making things difficult for us, Lady Friede...” the captain said awkwardly. lori couldn’t even tell where that voice was coming from. The echoes were throwing off her sense of direction. That was another high-level ninja skill that she had yet to learn. However, lori could at least tell where the rest of his men were hiding.

It’s true, exactly half of them are left. I guess the rest left to report to our superiors. Which means I really am supposed to be taking care of the rest. Now that things had settled down, the first thing lori did was thank Friede.

“U-Um... Thank you for saving me back there. I’m sorry. It’s because of me that you got hurt.”

“Huh? If anything, I should be thanking you! You’re the one who saved me!” Friede squeezed lori’s hand affectionately, unfazed by the blood running down her forehead.

“I thought that the net was gonna open up, so I let my guard down. I only realized it wouldn’t because you warned me. If I’d kept going, it would have smacked me on the forehead.”

Wouldn’t that have been better? Apparently, the forehead wound was something else, and the net itself had smacked her on the back of the head. Either way, it was obvious to lori that she’d just gotten in Friede’s way, yet Friede didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Plus, I’m pretty sure that captain only gave up on executing the grimalkin because you vouched for me. Isn’t that right?!” Friede directed the last

question to the captain hiding up in the tree, and he gave her a quiet “that’s right.”

Just then, Okoge and his two companions walked into the clearing.

“Come on, stop teasing the captain,” he said jokingly to Friede.

“Ah, welcome back, Okoge.”

“Thanks. I see you took care of things here.”

Hiboshi walked over to the tied-up grimalkin and started poking them.

“I heard you saved these guys’ lives? Thanks for getting my brethren out of a pickle.”

“Well, lori’s the one who still has the final say.”

Everyone turned to lori, and she blushed a little.

“I don’t actually have the power to pardon them. But I will ask my father to lessen their punishment.”

Since the captain had put lori in charge of resolving this affair, she suspected things would work out in the end. At the very least, the grimalkin wouldn’t be sentenced to death.

“It’s hard to prove crimes of theft, and theft itself isn’t a capital offense in Wa. There are too many false charges brought against people to punish it too harshly. Of course, if you’d killed people, things would be different. But we haven’t heard of any travelers going missing around here. So as long as the Heavenwatchers are willing to overlook the fact that you used their techniques to steal, you’ll only have to spend some time in jail,” lori explained.

Friede beamed and said, “Really?! Thanks a lot, lori!”

“I-It’s not like I’m doing it for you!”

lori almost smiled, but she was too embarrassed, so she lashed out at Friede instead.

However, Friede just grinned and said, “Ehehe, thanks.”

And with that, she fell to the ground, unconscious.

“F-Friede?!”

“All right, Master, let’s get started.” I waved to her and cast the strengthening magic I’d prepared. My feet lifted off of the sandy ground, with my toes barely touching it. “Whoa, there.”

There was an equal amount of gravitational force simultaneously pulling me up and down, effectively making me weightless. If I made myself any lighter, I’d float away like a balloon, so I needed to be careful how much power I put behind the spell.

“You better be careful, Veight. You hear me?” Ryucco said in a worried voice. He wasn’t thumping the ground like he usually did when he was worried, because he didn’t want to attract the sandworms’ attention.

Our investigation had led pretty deep into the desert. And since the Demon Empress herself was personally participating, the council had dispatched Meraldia’s finest mages and engineers to make sure the team had everything they needed. Ryucco had come with the first wave of engineers, and apparently, Kite would be showing up later as well. Ever since he’d been promoted to Grand Magus, Kite hasn’t had too many opportunities to leave the country, so he was probably looking forward to this trip.

I gave Ryucco a reassuring smile and said, “The sandworms don’t react to anything as light as Parker is, at least. It takes a lot of energy for them to hunt down prey, and it’s not cost-efficient for them to go after small animals. In fact, you could walk across a sandworm and be just fine, Ryucco. Even the trap-laying worms make their traps dense enough for you to walk over.”

“I’m not worried about myself, you blockhead! Take a hint for once!”

Then what are you worried about?

Master gently patted Ryucco on the head and gave him a knowing smile. “You have a kind heart, Ryucco. I’m glad you’re worried about your fellow disciple.”

“I-I-I-I’m not worried about him at all!”

The fact that he was vehemently denying it just proved that Master was right. *I didn’t expect him to be worried about me, of all things.*

“I’ll be fine,” I assured them. “I’ve already defeated one sandworm.”

“I’m worried *because* you’re being so nonchalant! You can’t let your guard down!”

“Fine, fine. I promise I’ll be careful. I wouldn’t want to cause my fellow disciple to go mad with worry.”

Among Master’s disciples, the only thing I had over everyone else was my fighting capability, so the least I could do was put it to good use here. Unfortunately, my words didn’t seem to reassure Ryucco at all.

“You still have your transceiver, right? It’s on, yeah? You haven’t broken it like last time, have you?”

“Ah, I totally forgot about turning it on.”

Ryucco’s ears shot up. “I knew it! Every godsdamn time! Why do you think everyone’s always worried about you?!”

“All right, all right, I’m turning it on,” I said, shrugging. *Man, you’re such a nag.*

I took a small wooden plate out of my pocket. It was roughly the size of a cell phone, with a stylish pattern engraved onto it.

“There’s a chunk of magesteel and an iron plate carved with a magic circle inside the wood, right?” I asked.

“Yep. The wooden exterior is there to keep the magesteel insulated and to protect the magic circle. It’s tough as nails, so it won’t break even in your *clumsy hands*.”

There was a bit of edge in his voice. Considering I’d broken every prototype he’d made though, he was well within his rights to bear a grudge.

“What’s the range on this thing?”

“Depends on the flow of mana in your location. The mana here’s pretty unstable, but in a normal environment...it can reach about as far as your howl.”

That’s a pretty rough estimate. How many kilometers is that, even? Over the years, Ryucco had improved on all the magical technology that Eleora had brought over from Rolmund, save for the range on these transceivers.

“It’s a shame it only goes that far...”

“We’re trying to improve the magic circle, but extending the range makes the design too big to fit when carved by hand.” Ryucco sighed. “Maybe if there was a way to use magnifying glasses to make super small, super fine magic circles, we could do it.”

That would have been possible back on Earth, but in this world, the technology wasn’t quite there yet.

“I’ll see if I can’t think of something when we get home. But for now, I’m off.”

“Gotcha. You better not die, you hear me?”

I smiled at Ryucco. “Don’t worry, I haven’t died once since being born in this world.”

“You’re still talking to me, so ain’t that obvious? Hahaha!”

Though, in absolute terms, I have died once. I gave Ryucco a casual wave, then bounded across the dunes, careful not to let the wind blow me off track. It was a strange sensation being nearly weightless. The first astronauts to reach the moon must have felt the same way.

“Now, then...”

As I landed above where I suspected the sandworm’s nest was, I drew my Blast Rifle and aimed it at the ground. Before firing, though, I pulled out the transceiver and said, “I’m beginning the assault.”

“Okay,” Master replied from her perch high in the sky.

The first blast of light from my rifle got a rise out of the sandworm. The sand around me caved in, and a massive jaw opened up directly underneath.

“What a sight,” Master said in an awed voice, watching as the sandworm’s jaw began to move in an attempt to swallow me whole. The endless rows of teeth grew closer, but I wasn’t worried.

“Here I go.” I switched Ryuuga to full-auto mode and started blasting away. In full-auto, the bullets weren’t as large, but I sure could fire a lot more of them. A normal mage would end up drained completely in seconds, but I had a thousand times as much mana as a normal human. This barely even put a dent

in my reserves. Plus, I'd had a few special modifications put into my rifle recently.

"Wow, I'm actually floating."

The recoil from the rifle was enough to keep me in the air since I weighed almost nothing. I kind of felt like a futuristic mobile suit, hovering in the air and blasting away at a giant monster.

"What do you think, Master?!"

"Mmm, Ryucco's modifications appear to be working. I never would have thought to take advantage of the recoil to allow you to float instead of dampening it."

"Ah, thanks..." I'd been hoping she would praise how cool I looked, not my ingenuity. Master really was a scientist through and through.

Sighing to myself, I focused on tearing the sandworm below me to shreds. The larger sandworm types half-buried themselves in their own sand traps, making them immobile. There was nothing it could do to escape an assault from above. Moreover, once it had sprung its trap, it took a long time for it to gather enough sand to hide again. And I wasn't planning on giving it even a second to escape.

Eventually, the sandworm stopped struggling. However, I knew simple creatures like worms could keep moving even after death. So I kept firing just in case.

"That's enough, Veight," Master said, sensing no life coming from the worm. I let up on my assault. The ground below was still, save for the sand trickling into the pit. The worm was well and truly dead.

"All right, I'm heading back to everyone else," I said.

"Go ahead and take a break. I can handle recovering the corpse."

With a twirl of her finger, Master began telekinetically lifting the massive beast out of the ground. She had an insane amount of mana to work with, so she could even accomplish feats like this.

"Holy crap!" one of my werewolves exclaimed. The sandscales and the people

of Wa who'd joined the expedition started muttering excitedly to each other as well.

"To think someone could lift such a massive creature with just telekinesis..."

"Meraldia's Demon Empress is a greater mage than I realized."

"I suppose I should have expected as much from one of the vice-commander's assistants."

Hang on, I'm her assistant, not the other way around. In fact, she's the one who taught me everything I know. I wanted to set the record straight, but starting an argument would only disturb Master. Right now, she was zipping around the sandworm like a butterfly, completely ignoring the comments of everyone down below.

"How long will her examination take, Veight?" Fumino asked, walking over to me.

"Sorry, but I've got no clue. Probably as long as it'll take to eat lunch?"

"Understood. Then we'll rest here for now."

"Thanks."

I left Master to her own devices, and ate a simple lunch of jerky and dried fruits. The jerky tasted like pure salt, but it was surprisingly good in the heat of the desert. For once, I actually felt like eating more. Meanwhile, Fumino had a dark-brown ball of some unidentifiable food mixture. It looked like those portable rations ninjas in books and anime always eat. I was curious about what it tasted like, but it would be awkward to ask her to share.

"Fumino, is that ball made of rice flour and sugar?"

"Yes, it's the Heavenwatchers' secret recipe, but...how do you know about it?"

Oof, I've been caught. Everyone in the Chrysanthemum Court knew I was a reincarnator, and sometimes they purposely brought out things like this to get me to divulge knowledge from my past life.

"I'm sure you can guess how."

“Can I, now?” Fumino chuckled. It seemed this time at least had just been a harmless prank. After she was done laughing, Fumino broke off a tiny chunk and handed it to me.

“The primary ingredients are indeed rice, honey, and sugar. There are also a few herbs and vegetables mixed in for health benefits. It’s not as filling as some of our other rations, but it’s very nutritious. Oh, and it’s good for staving off exhaustion thanks to the sugar.”

So it’s more of a supplement than a meal. Making it sweet also made it a refreshing snack.

I plopped the chunk into my mouth. The taste was simple, with ginger and honey providing most of the flavor, but it was good.

“The demon army should probably look into making rations like these,” I said, considering its portable nature.

“You need to pack some kind of insect repellent into it as well, or it’ll get devoured by bugs.”

“I see.”

It would have been nice if the meal could just be packaged into a can or a bottle, but Meraldia’s manufacturing wasn’t at that level yet. Since there were only limited ways to preserve food, travel rations ended up being pretty bland.

As I swallowed, Fumino suddenly changed the subject.

“By the way, Veight, I’m worried about Friede.”

“Me too,” I replied with a wan smile. Knowing Friede, she was probably getting into all sorts of trouble in Wa.

Fumino shot me a surprised look. “You don’t look that worried to me.”

“Oh, I definitely am. As both her father and the Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, I’m worried she might be causing trouble for the Chrysanthemum Court.”

I coughed a little; the rice had been drier than I’d expected, and some of it was stuck in my throat.

“Though, I think the fact that you’re here means I don’t need to worry all that much, huh?”

“Well, you’re not wrong... However, what makes you think that?”

Choosing my words carefully, I replied, “You’re the Heavenwatcher in charge of Meraldian affairs. From your perspective, it would be ideal if Meraldia’s Commonwealth Council and the Chrysanthemum Court grew closer. In that sense, it could be said that you’re Friede’s ally.” Fumino said nothing, so I scratched my head and added, “And if you—Friede’s ally—aren’t by her side, that means she’s doing just fine, isn’t that right?”

“I’m here because I was ordered to be.”

“So it seems,” I said with a grin, and Fumino frowned.

“Curses... You baited me into saying that, didn’t you?”

“Hahaha! Sorry.”

I hadn’t been sure whether Fumino was here of her own volition or because Tokitaka had ordered her to come, so I’d coaxed a response to find out. *Turns out she’s here on Tokitaka’s orders.*

Fumino glared angrily at me, so I hurriedly said, “I’m sure Tokitaka just wants to ensure the Heavenwatchers have a presence here. This might be presumptuous of me, but I believe he values our relationship, and wants to strengthen it.”

It was only by summoning people from my world that Wa had managed to halt the desertification of its land and develop itself this far. Since I was likely the last reincarnator that would ever come to this world, the Chrysanthemum Court was highly interested in maintaining cordial relations. Furthermore, it was the Heavenwatchers who had found me, so their influence within the court had risen accordingly.

“Anyway, I imagine Tokitaka only sent you here because he determined that Friede didn’t need an assistant of your caliber. Which is why I’m not as worried as I would be.”

“I’d like to believe that’s true, but I can’t be sure.” Fumino put a hand on her

cheek and sighed. She still looked worried.

“Is something on your mind?”

“Yes...I can’t tell what Lord Tokitaka is after.”

I couldn’t either, but I grinned at Fumino and said, “Well, I have faith in my daughter. I’m sure she’s already surprised the Kushin just by being herself.”

“I’m uncertain that being herself is necessarily a good thing when it comes to the Kushin...” Fumino’s frown grew deeper, but I just laughed.

You don’t have to worry about the expectations of us adults, Friede, just do what you want.

—The Chrysanthemum Court’s Meeting—

The Heavenwatchers that had been sent to the bandits’ hideout had just returned to the Chrysanthemum Court and given their report.

“...And that is everything we saw.”

“Thank you for returning so swiftly. My apologies for sending you immediately back to work, but please return to your captain’s side.”

“Yes, sir.”

After dismissing his subordinates, Tokitaka turned back to his fellow Kushin.

“What are your thoughts, my friends?”

“We may be pushing too far,” the leader of the Kushin, Taira, said. He was one of the people who knew Veight personally. “You’re treading a fine line, Lord Mihoshi. I know we all wish to measure Lady Friede’s capabilities, but if Lord Veight were to find us out, he would not be pleased.”

“I understand, but we can hardly ask him for permission to test his daughter. That would be far too rude,” Tokitaka said with a joking smile. “Besides, we allowed Lady Friede the option to back down. She participated of her own volition. Had she shown no interest in the grimalkin bandits, we would have pushed her no further. She has no obligation to help a foreign country with their internal affairs, after all.”

“But you knew from the start that she would get involved, didn’t you?”

“Indeed. She’s just like her father, unable to contain her curiosity.”

The other Kushin sighed in unison.

“You were right, so we can hardly fault you for your conjectures.”

“Did you also predict she would resolve the issue in such a fashion?”

Tokitaka shook his head. “Definitely not. Had I known how she would deal with the problem, there would have been no need to test her at all. However, I did expect her to ask for clemency on the grimalkin’s behalf.”

“The cuteness of those lazy louts is certainly hard to resist,” one of the Kushin said, then awkwardly cleared his throat. “My apologies... I didn’t mean to insult the Mihoshi family’s retainers. Please forgive me.”

“It’s all right, I know you meant no offense.”

The existence of the grimalkin posed a big problem to the Kushin. They were lazy and self-centered, but the common folk of Wa loved them. Moreover, Meraldia’s demon army wished for coexistence between demons and humans, so politically, the Kushin couldn’t afford to chase out the grimalkin.

“I’ve heard that Lady Friede is a kind girl, so I assumed she wouldn’t be willing to stand back and let the grimalkin die,” Tokitaka added. “However, it would of course become a diplomatic issue if Lord Veight’s daughter inserted herself into Wa’s affairs. So she could hardly afford to say, ‘Please don’t kill them because they’re cute.’”

Nonplussed, one of the Kushin asked, “If you knew all that, then why did you set this little charade up in the first place?!”

“Was this just some kind of cruel joke?” another Kushin followed up.

“I regret nominating you as the next leader of the Chrysanthemum Court...”

Tokitaka grinned and replied, “I predicted that Lady Friede would easily overpower the grimalkin and subsequently ask for them to be spared. But what I didn’t know was what methods she would employ. That was why I set up this little ‘charade,’ as you call it.”

“I’m amazed you can say that without feeling ashamed of yourself.”

“In fact, you look as though you thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing.”

The highest-ranking Kushin had known each other for decades, so they were pretty casual with each other in meetings where others weren't present.

Before the meeting could get completely derailed, Taira brought them back on topic.

“According to the report, Lady Friede skillfully negotiated her way out of a corner with the help of her friends.”

“Indeed. Strictly speaking, we bear the blame for allowing Lady Friede to be exposed to danger. I told the captain that if she or any of her friends mentioned this, then she should be allowed to ‘win’ her negotiations.”

Had the Chrysanthemum Court truly wanted to execute those grimalkin, the pleadings of a single exchange student wouldn't have swayed them at all. However, this was just a trial to test Friede's abilities.

Tokitaka folded his arms and sighed to himself. “That being said...this might have been taken too far.”

“Finally, you have some self-awareness!”

“No, I meant by Lady Friede, not me.” Rubbing his temples, Tokitaka explained, “I assigned my daughter to watch over Lady Friede, but I never dreamed she would forget her mission and take Lady Friede's side. Lord Veight's daughter really does take after him.”

“Why do you sound so happy about that?”

“Lord Mihoshi is going to start gushing about his daughter again, isn't he?”

“Please stop pretending like this is a problem when we all know you just want to go off about how amazing your daughter is.”

Laughing, the other Kushin all heckled Tokitaka.

He waved off their jabs and said in a serious voice, “According to the report...Lady Friede has won over the hearts of not just my daughter, but also the grimalkin. Her ability to turn enemies into allies proves she's the Black Werewolf King's true successor.”

“Indeed,” one of the Kushin replied, calming down. They knew when to joke around and when to be serious.

“If Lady Friede truly will grow up into another Black Werewolf King, it will mean that, for a time at least, Meraldia will have two Black Werewolf Kings.”

“It seems that, as of late, Lord Veight has been focusing more and more on teaching the next generation. Judging by how Lady Friede has turned out, he almost certainly has the ability to raise anyone up into another Black Werewolf King.”

“In the past few years, Lord Veight has been so focused on domestic affairs that he has seldom traveled outside Meraldia. But now, diplomats personally trained by Lord Veight will be arriving at our shores.”

“If Lady Friede shows this much promise, who knows how capable Lord Veight’s other students are...”

The Kushin nodded to each other, coming to a unanimous conclusion.

“We cannot afford to underestimate Meraldia’s might.”

“Indeed.”

Seeing as a consensus had been reached, Tokitaka nodded and said, “Then I will get to work on winning Lady Friede over as an ally. Is that acceptable to all here?”

“We have no objections,” the Kushin said in unison, and Tokitaka breathed a sigh of relief. But then a worried frown crossed his face again.

“Is something the matter, Lord Mihoshi?”

“Not exactly...” Tokitaka rubbed his temples once more. “I just have a feeling something bad is about to happen.”

Friede woke up to find herself in one of the capital’s main streets.

“Mmn... Huh?”

She could feel herself bouncing up and down rhythmically. Someone seemed to be carrying her.

“Bow! Bow before your masters!”

“How dare you look so smug!”

Friede could hear the grimalkin she’d captured speaking arrogantly. She hurriedly sat up to figure out what was going on.

“What the heck is going on?!”

Looking around, she realized Joshua and Shirin were carrying her on what appeared to be a door. The grimalkin she’d supposedly captured were clearing the street of people, acting like they owned the place.

“Do you realize who you’re in the presence of?!”

“You stand before the Black Werewolf Princess!”

“The strongest woman in Meraldia!”

The grimalkin were beating on drums and ringing bells, attracting a crowd of Wa residents.

“What’s this? Some kind of new play?” one citizen asked.

“No! We’re the procession for Meraldia’s new legend—Black Werewolf Princess, Friede!”

“Black Werewolf Princess? Never heard of her. I only know about the Black Werewolf King.”

“Yeah, this is his daughter.”

“Wow, really? That’s amazing!”

Excitement spread throughout the crowd, and even more people began to gather.

“The Black Werewolf King’s daughter?”

“She defeated a group of bandits outside the city!”

“Where are those bandits now?”

The grimalkin coughed awkwardly and tried to come up with a passable lie.

“Ah, they’re long gone. Don’t worry, they won’t plague you any longer!”

“Yeah, she beat them down so hard you’ll never see them again! Rest easy, citizens!”

“U-Uh-huh, she slaughtered them without mercy!”

That got the crowd even more excited.

“Oh, that makes sense! The Black Werewolf King obliterated the nue, so of course his daughter wouldn’t show any mercy to bandits!”

“She must have taken them down single-handedly!”

“A cute girl like her took down a group of bandits all by herself? Oh my!”

Things have gotten really out of hand while I was unconscious. Friede started panicking a little, but she realized there wasn’t anything she could really do while being carried along on. It wasn’t like she could run away either.

“How did things even end up like this?” she muttered to herself, and to her surprise, she got a reply.

“We carried you back to the city while you were unconscious,” lori said from right next to her. She was scanning the crowd, keeping an eye out for any potential threats.

“I allowed the grimalkin to be released from their bonds in exchange for a promise that they’ll never steal again. If they break their word this time, they’ll be executed for sure.” lori sighed, frowning. “I thought they’d leave after I freed them, but instead they followed us back.”

“Huh...”

As Friede looked at the grimalkin, Hiboshi clambered up onto her makeshift platform.

“Grimalkin are whimsical, but they can smell when someone is an ally or not. These guys trust you now. Or, well, they’re sticking with you because they trust you’ll help them out through anything.”

“That’s not as nice as I thought!”

Friede shook her head in exasperation. She didn’t think the grimalkin would become her followers just because she showed them some mercy. *I guess I shouldn’t think too deeply about it.*

“Well, whatever,” she muttered with a sigh.

“You’re fine with them following you?”

“That’s just how demons are.”

The weak swore fealty to the strong, and the strong took on the responsibility of protecting them. Veight had told Friede that this law was what all demons held to, and how the demon army had been able to unite under a single leader. So, Friede let herself continue being paraded through the streets.

After a march through the city, Friede was brought to the Chrysanthemum Court’s main building, and a doctor came to examine her.

“Hmm...” After using a bit of basic epoch magic to diagnose her, the doctor smiled. “It looks like your wounds have fully healed. And as far as I can tell, there’s no internal damage either. This is my first time examining a werewolf, so I can’t be completely certain, but I believe you’re fine.”

“Human doctors are so unreliable...” Shirin said, but Friede didn’t seem to mind the half-baked diagnosis.

“Werewolves reconstitute their entire bodies when they transform, so small wounds like these heal in no time—especially since I’m, like, half-transformed at all times.”

Friede wiped her forehead down with a wet towel to get rid of the dried blood caking it. She also rubbed at the lump on the back of her head.

“Yeah, I feel fine.”

“You’ve always been sturdy, even when we were little, Friede. I honestly envy you for it,” Yuhette said with a smile, taking the bloody towel from Friede. “But that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to be reckless, *okay?*” she added.

“Okay...” Friede said, a little intimidated by Yuhette’s tone. She could be terrifying when she was angry. Meanwhile, the reformed bandit grimalkin were all sitting in a circle in the corner of the room talking to each other.

“What are we gonna do now?”

“Why don’t we just stick with our new boss?”

By boss, do they mean me? Friede wondered, eavesdropping on their

conversation with her enhanced hearing. She was fine with the “Black Werewolf Princess” title, but she wasn’t too keen on being called “boss.”

One of the grimalkin piped up and said, “Sure, but the boss is going back to Meraldia. Are we gonna go with her?”

“Don’t think so. No way the Chrysanthemum Court lets us use any of their ships.”

“Then what do we do? How are we gonna survive without the boss? If the Heavenwatchers change their mind, they could have us executed at any time.”

“Hmm...if worse comes to worst, we’ll just have to escape through the Windswept Dunes. We can’t rely on the boss for everything.”

Friede’s fists trembled as she heard them talk. *‘Boss’ this, ‘boss’ that; don’t you know I don’t wanna be called that? Sure, go off into the Windswept Dunes without me! Wait, through the Windswept Dunes?* Catching on to their specific choice of wording, Friede focused her attention on their conversation.

Unfortunately, the grimalkin quickly changed topics.

“There are too many sandworms there, we won’t make it.”

“Also, it’s too hot during the day and too cold at night there.”

“For now, let’s just dance.”

“How about the sand dance?”

The grimalkin got to their feet and started undulating in some dance that Friede didn’t recognize.

“Off we go— Into the never-ending dunes—”

“Far to the northwest— But tarry a while ere you depart—”

Friede watched on, dumbfounded. *What are they doing?*

“Tigers and bulls don’t scare me—”

“Only the snake of the desert can petrify me—”

They started wagging their tails as they danced, and made a motion as if to scatter something with their hands. After a bit, Friede figured out they were

emulating the motions of a sandworm. The way they were moving their hands was reminiscent of the way sand flew upwards when one of the larger variants shot up to capture its prey.

“Umm, sorry for interrupting but...” The grimalkin were too absorbed in their dance to notice Friede addressing them.

“Fret not— Fret not—”

“If you just climb the mountain, you have nothing to fear—”

“As long as you search for the landmarks—”

“All will be well— All will be well—”

“You just need to find the holy land in the deseeeeeeeert—”

Everyone was watching now, and they stared in amazement as the grimalkin finished their dance and sat back down as if nothing had happened.

“I love the sand dance.”

“It’s definitely the best of the nine special dances Lord Ason left for us.”

“I feel all my worries melting away when I dance it.”

The grimalkin looked like they were about to start napping, but Friede ran over and shouted, “What was that?! Teach me!”

“Nyowha?!” They all jumped in surprise.

“I feel like there was some deep meaning to that dance! By Lord Ason, do you mean the same Lord Ason who saved the grimalkin?!”

“Umm...yeah, we do.” The grimalkin exchanged glances. “Lord Ason taught our ancestors a bunch of things.”

“That dance was one of them, and he said that whenever we were in a crisis we should dance it.”

“Some villages remembered the dance and others forgot, so it’s not like all grimalkin know it.”

“Yeah, our village forgot most of them.”

Friede nodded, her interest piqued. “I see, it’s a pretty cool dance.”

“Hah, I can’t believe you guys try to dance your worries away,” Joshua said in a disparaging tone as he munched on a rice ball. Transforming earlier had used up a lot of calories, and he needed a bunch of food to recharge. “If that actually worked, no one would have any troubles at all.”

“Indeed. I never thought I would agree with you again,” Shirin said, shaking his head and taking a sip from his teacup.

However, Friede didn’t think this dance was useless at all.

“Who knows, maybe a dance really can solve our problems. You think so too, right, Yuhette?”

“Well, it is true that ancient legends tend to have some sort of wisdom contained in them, but...” Yuhette frowned, furrowing her brow. “I find it hard to believe those movements and those lyrics have any meaning at all.”

“But that Ason guy helped the grimalkin out a lot, right? And he was apparently super wise. Why would he teach the grimalkin a dance that has no meaning?”

Iori looked like she had something to say, and Friede turned to her with a questioning look. However, Iori just averted her gaze and said nothing. *Maybe she wants to tell me something, but she can’t because it would break confidentiality?* Friede wondered what Iori had to say, but the grimalkin took priority. After all, they’d decided to follow her now.

“Those lyrics from before used a few ancient Wa words.” Friede took a paper and pen out of her bag and started writing. “Umm, how did the lyrics go again?”

“Off we go— Into the never-ending dunes— Far to the northwest— But tarry a while ere you depart—”

Far to the northwest— But tarry a while ere you depart— Friede sang along in her head.

“Tigers and bulls don’t scare me— Only the snake of the desert can petrify me — Fret not— Fret not— If you just climb the mountain, you have nothing to fear —”

Friede jotted down the lyrics as the grimalkin sang the song for her a second

time.

“As long as you search for the landmarks— All will be well— All will be well— You just need to find the holy land in the desert—”

Joshua finished scarfing down a second rice ball, and with his mouth still full, he nodded and said, “Yeah, I don’t get it at all.”

“Really?” Friede pointed to the second verse. “Let’s start here with ‘northwest’ and ‘tarry.’”

“Oh wait, I think I heard there was a Wa superstition about that,” Shirin said, cocking his head. He was a huge fan of Wa culture, so it wasn’t surprising he’d heard. “Drat, I can’t seem to recall... Mind jogging my memory, Friede?”

“No problem. In Wa, the northwestern direction is considered unlucky.”

“I see. What about the ‘tarry’ bit then?”

Friede grinned and explained, “If your destination is in the unlucky direction, then you’re actually supposed to head out a day early, and in some other direction first. That way, you can make it so that your destination no longer lies directly northwest.”

“I’ve never heard about a custom like that. Was it in any of our lectures?”

“Nope, dad told me about it,” Friede said with an embarrassed smile. “Apparently it’s such an ancient custom that no one actually does it anymore.”

“Lord Veight knows even about *that* secret history?!” Iori exclaimed in surprise, then suddenly realized what she’d said. “N-Never mind, it’s nothing.”

“I mean, my dad’s kind of...uh...special, so I don’t think he stole your state secrets or anything.”

Friede came up with a lame excuse of an explanation, since she couldn’t divulge the secret that Veight was a reincarnator.

Seeing as that only made Iori more panicked, Friede hurriedly added, “Besides, he’s Movi—er, I mean the Demon Empress’s disciple, and she’s lived for a thousand years. It’s not really that surprising that he knows a bunch of ancient history, right?”

“Uncle truly is amazing...” Shirin muttered in awe. “Anyway, let’s get back on topic. The point is the start of the song is about not going northwest, right?”

“I think so, but then what’s the next line about? ‘Tigers and bulls don’t scare me.’”

Unable to hold back any longer, Iori said, “Friede, the ancient Wa word for ‘northeast’ is a combination of the words for ‘tiger’ and ‘cow.’”

“Really?! Wow, you know so much, Iori!”

“It’s because I’m studying prediction magic and astronomy with the Heavenwatchers. We have to learn all the old names for the cardinal directions.”

Iori awkwardly sidled backwards, not getting up from her sitting position.

“Thanks a lot, Iori!”

“N-No need to thank me.”

With that mystery solved, Friede puffed out her chest proudly.

“It all makes sense now! Basically, the northeast is a safe direction to go in. But then, you wouldn’t need to tarry if you’re going that way, right?”

Yuhette stepped in when Friede faltered.

“The ‘snake of the desert’ in the next verse is probably referring to the sandworms. So maybe the ‘tarry’ is actually about going in a different direction to avoid them?”

“Ah! That makes sense. You’re so smart, Yuhette!”

“You’re plenty intelligent yourself, Friede.” Yuhette patted Friede on the head, and she grinned happily.

Meanwhile, Iori glared at Yuhette for reasons Friede couldn’t fathom. Putting Iori out of her mind for now, Friede went on to the next verse.

“The ‘fret not’ is self-evident, but what about ‘If you just climb the mountain, you have nothing to fear’?”

Shirin came in to help with this one. “Thinking about it normally, there are mountains to the northeast of Wa. Though, I’m not sure where the starting

point of the journey is meant to be in this song.”

“Since the dance was passed down among the grimalkin, it’s probably the village where this dance is still remembered. Because it’s giving rough directions, we probably don’t need a perfectly accurate starting point either,” Yuhette explained, and Friede nodded in agreement.

“So there are mountains to the northeast. Do you think we could borrow a map?”

“I doubt it,” Shirin replied, shaking his head. “Maps have a lot of classified information in them.” He looked over at Iori, expecting her to agree. “We can’t borrow one, can we?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to get you one, at least,” she replied, and picked up the paper with the lyrics written down on it. Taking Friede’s pen, she began drawing something.

Joshua asked, “What are you doing?”

“Oh, just scribbling a few things.”

“Seriously?”

Before Joshua could complain, Iori finished her “scribbles.”

Shirin looked down at the paper and sighed. “This is a map, isn’t it?”

However, Iori just kept a straight face and replied, “They’re *just* scribbles. For one thing, it’s not a very accurate map, and for another, I’ve omitted numerous military installations from it. So there’s no problem with you guys having it.”

“Thanks, Iori. But is this really okay?” Friede asked.

“Of course it is. Heavenwatchers study both astronomy and geography. Every one of us has a perfectly accurate map of Wa in our head.”

“I meant, is it okay to give this to us—not is the map any good.” Friede gave Iori a worried look. “Won’t you get in trouble for doing this? You were assigned to just watch over us, weren’t you?”

“Well...that’s not exactly what I...um...” Iori fumbled over her words, and Friede could immediately tell by her scent she was about to lie.

“Right, sorry, but I’ll know if you’re lying. In fact, I can even tell when you’re *thinking* about lying.”

“If you already know the truth, then why did you ask?” lori retorted, pouting.

Joshua turned to Yuhette and whispered, “Is it just me, or has lori gotten a lot more expressive than before?”

“It’s because she’s opened up to Friede. Everyone who gets close to her ends up like that, myself included.”

“Oh, I see. You sound really happy about that, Yuhette.”

“Not at all.”

Of course, lori could hear them perfectly, and she hung her head in embarrassment.

Friede turned her attention to the map lori had drawn for them. “So there’s a mountain range to the northeast of the capital that runs westward.”

“Yes. On the off chance that any nation manages to cross the desert to invade, they’ll still have this mountain range to contend with,” lori explained. “There is one secret path through the mountains, but...”

It was clear this tidbit of information was confidential enough that lori didn’t feel comfortable sharing it.

“Ah, don’t worry! Let’s just move on to the next line. What does ‘holy land’ here refer to?”

“In this case, I believe it means a place where departed spirits can rest in peace. Most of Wa follows the Mondstrahl religion, though it’s rather different from the variation you’ll find in Meraldia. For one thing, we believe there’s a paradise—a sort of holy land that a person’s soul goes to after death.”

“Ah...I remember my dad mentioning something like that.”

Since a lot of Wa’s culture had been shaped by the Japanese reincarnators who had come there in the past, Veight’s stories about Japan had given her a good grounding in Wa customs.

“Err, so, if I recall correctly, this holy land is supposed to be somewhere in the

west, right?”

Iori's jaw dropped open in shock.

“That's correct... But how did you know that?”

“My dad told me about it,” Friede said flatly, like it was nothing, adding to Iori's shock.

Shirin nodded and said, “Uncle really does seem to know everything. He's not only a peerless warrior, but a master scholar as well. I see now why my father speaks so highly of him all the time.”

“Anyway, so this holy land's in the west, but what does that have to do with the riddle?” Joshua asked, eager to hear the solution.

Friede thought about it for a few seconds, then replied, “Basically, we need to start off in the wrong direction and go northeast, then follow the mountain range westward to find whatever important thing is at the holy land.”

“I get it now. So we're supposed to enter the desert from that specific direction.” Joshua nodded, then pointed to the next line in the song. “What about this ‘all will be well’ bit? Is it just fluff?”

“Actually, the word ‘well’ can also mean ‘left hand’ in Wa, so I think it's another directional marker!” Friede flexed the fingers on her left hand.

Hearing this, Shirin asked, “Did uncle teach you that as well?”

“Yeah. I learned about it when we were playing the word game.”

“The what now?”

“You know, when you say a word that starts with the letter the last word ended with?”

Thinking back on it, Friede realized her dad had taught her quite a bit even when they'd been playing around. It was a little impressive, honestly.

“Anyway, the point is, we have to go left when we hit the right landmark. So we're going from northeast to west, or, well, northwest, and then at the right spot we turn left.”

“That sounds reasonable. The map Lady Iori drew for us does show the

mountain range curving away from the west at a certain point.” Shirin nodded in agreement, while Yuhette pointed to the last line.

“The last line also mentions that the holy land is in the desert.”

“Exactly, so we definitely have to turn away from the range and go south into the desert.” Friede looked up at her friends. “Let’s head to the mountains in the northeast, then go west from there. There’s gotta be something special at the spot marked out by the song. Sounds like an exciting adventure, don’t you think?”

Everyone nodded, eager to see where this mystery led.

—Iori’s Observations—

The grimalkin Friede had rescued were whispering to each other in the inn’s courtyard.

“I knew we could rely on Lady Friede.”

“Lord Ason was right.”

Iori jumped down from the roof and landed in front of the grimalkin.

“I knew it.”

“Wa-Wa-Wha?!”

As the grimalkin scrambled backwards, Iori pulled out her pistol.

“If you intend on using Friede for your own means, I’ll end you all right here.”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

“We’re not trying to use her, we’re just following Lord Ason’s instructions!”

The grimalkin talked quickly, scared that Iori might shoot them anyway.

“Our ancestors professed that should we find a human we could trust completely that we should show them this dance!”

“What for?” After a second of consideration, Iori realized the answer to her own question. “Ah...I see now. You grimalkin are too lazy to write down important information for future generations. So Lord Ason encoded it into dances with the hope that centuries down the line humans would be able to figure it out. Isn’t that right?”

“P-P-Probably! Yeah, that’s gotta be it! So please! Put that gun away!”

“Why are you so mad, anyway?! This has nothing to do with you!”

Iori quickly retorted, “She’s an important guest from Meraldia. You can’t just do whatever you want with her!”

The grimalkin exchanged glances, then gave Iori a questioning look. “Is that *really* the only reason you’re angry?”

“Of course it is. At any rate, I’ll overlook your antics this one time. Friede would be sad if I killed you, after all.”

Fuming, Iori holstered her pistol. She’d never attached the fuse, so she hadn’t intended to fire it in the first place. *That really is the only reason...right?* she asked herself as she stalked away. While she couldn’t answer that question, she had a report to deliver, so she put it in the back of her mind.

Iori returned to the Mihoshi manor and told Tokitaka everything she’d seen so far.

“And so we puzzled out that Lord Ason’s wisdom was hidden in the dance the grimalkin performed.”

Tokitaka pushed a plate of sweet buns towards Iori and muttered, “I believe the saying ‘finding a warhorse in your canteen’ is probably apt for what happened here. The Chrysanthemum Court has employed grimalkin for over a decade now, and yet we never figured this out.”

Iori hadn’t even thought of that until Tokitaka pointed it out.

Picking up a sweet bun, Tokitaka added, “Anyone from the Chrysanthemum Court would immediately be able to tell the significance of the lyrics of the sand dance. And we’ve employed grimalkin for years who know this sand dance. Forget about solving this mystery; we never even noticed it existed.” He let out a long sigh. “...Because the grimalkin never trusted any of us enough to show us the sand dance.”

“You have a point, father.”

Iori had known the three musketeers since she’d been a child, but they’d

never once shown her that dance.

Tokitaka nodded and said, “Had Friede not shown up, we might never have known this information existed. It’s this side of her...and her father...that makes the two of them so good at what they do.”

“I see what you mean about Friede, but is Lord Veight really the same way?”

“Absolutely. He’s a master schemer. Wherever he goes, he turns enemies into allies. Even though he’s strong enough to get whatever he wants by force, Veight always looks at things from the other side’s perspective, and comes up with a solution leaving everyone happy. As a result, everyone always feels indebted to him.”

Tokitaka was being unusually talkative today. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying telling stories about Veight.

“It’s because he’s so considerate towards everyone that he’s the best ally you could ask for. But at the same time, he always accomplishes so much more than you’d expect, so you have to watch out. If you leave him alone for a few seconds, he’ll probably make a new discovery.” As Tokitaka said that, Iori suddenly realized something.

“Wait, is the reason you sent Fumino to join Lord Veight because...”

“That’s right. I’m almost certain Veight will uncover something extraordinary in the unexplored wastes of the Windswept Dunes. The Chrysanthemum Court needs someone there who can report on what’s happening firsthand. Besides, Fumino has known Veight for ages, so he trusts her.”

Iori’s heart sank. She thought she’d been chosen over Fumino to watch over Friede because Tokitaka had finally recognized her skills, but it turned out Fumino had simply been given a more important job to do.

Noticing the look on her face, Tokitaka gave her a reassuring smile. “Don’t feel too bad. It doesn’t change the fact that I believe you’re qualified to be Friede’s observer; that’s why I gave you the mission in the first place. And you’ve done a splendid job.”

“Thank you very much...” she replied, bowing her head.

“So, what does she plan to do from here on out?”

Iori looked up at Tokitaka. “She wants to take the grimalkin to the Windswept Dunes. I think she’ll make a formal request to the Chrysanthemum Court soon for permission.”

“I see. And I take it you’re here to ask me to approve that request?”

For a moment, Iori was at a loss for words. Tokitaka was right on the mark.

“Sh-She never asked me to intercede on her behalf.”

“So you want to cooperate with her of your own free will.”

“U-Umm...”

This was the truth, but Iori couldn’t bring herself to admit it. Tokitaka wasn’t the kind of man who’d care too much about small blunders on his subordinates’ part, but Iori had a feeling this was more than just a tiny mistake.

As expected, Tokitaka’s expression grew grim.

“Think carefully about your next words. The sand dance’s lyrics show a route heading into the desert from the mountains along Wa’s northwestern border. If such a route really does exist, it means potential enemies could also use it to invade from the desert instead. We will have to strengthen our defenses along that border.”

Tokitaka had a point. Iori hadn’t considered this at all.

In a purposely calm voice, Tokitaka said, “The Heavenwatchers do perform covert operations in foreign nations, but only to protect Wa. If a route leading into Wa from the Windswept Dunes is discovered, we will be obligated to investigate it thoroughly.”

“I-I know! That’s why I was hoping to let Friede do the investigation, and provide a meticulous report on everything she finds!” Iori had come up with that on the spot, but she hoped it was a plausible enough excuse.

However, Tokitaka shook his head, and replied, “Calm down and think about what would truly be the best choice for Wa. Meraldia and Wa may be allies, but even so, we can’t simply grant them information that could jeopardize our borders. Would it not be best for Wa to deny Friede access to the mountains

and have the Heavenwatchers investigate this route themselves?”

“Perhaps, but...”

If that happened, Iori wouldn't be able to explore with Friede. She knew how excited Friede was to get to the bottom of this mystery, and she didn't want to deny her the opportunity to do so. Just imagining the disappointed look on Friede's face made Iori's chest tighten.

Once again, Tokitaka sighed when he saw her expression.

“Please don't make that face. You're making me feel like a failure of a father, and like a mean boss. I'm simply telling you what would be best from a practical standpoint.” Frowning, Tokitaka awkwardly cleared his throat. “But I guess it's fine. We would probably have to share this information with Meraldia eventually anyway. Besides, preliminary reports suggest the desert will disappear at some point. When that happens, we'll share a border with Meraldia regardless, so it's best to improve relations as much as we can now.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anything.

“Iori...I'm giving you a new mission. Assist Friede in her investigation of the Windswept Dunes as a formal member of the Heavenwatchers, and report your findings to me. This will be an official mission.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

By making it official, that meant that Iori's accomplishments would be properly recorded in the Heavenwatchers' annals, immortalizing her in the organization's history. Of course, she'd just get a few pages in the multi-volume almanac that was the Heavenwatchers' history, but it still made her happy.

“I'll do my absolute best to ensure this mission succeeds!”

“Good. I'll put the three musketeers under your command. I will also have a few other Heavenwatchers follow along covertly. Feel free to use them as you see fit.”

“Yes, sir!”

Iori bowed to Tokitaka as a subordinate would to her commander, but then she cocked her head and looked up at him. There was something that nagged at

her.

“Umm...”

“Yes?”

“Are you...worried about me?”

Tokitaka was assigning an awful lot of backup to someone who was just there to observe and record what she saw. Iori knew she hadn't proved herself yet, but even then, that was far more support than was necessary.

Tokitaka cleared his throat again and looked away. “Is there any father out there who wouldn't be worried about sending his daughter out into the desert?”

“Thank you, father.”

I guess he's more of a worrywart than I realized.

“Man, this is fun!” I excitedly looked over the mana distribution map I'd finally completed. “I can't believe the sandworms' ecology was directly correlated with the mana density of a location!”

“Now, now, don't get ahead of yourself. We still haven't proven that correlation exists,” Master said, though she was grinning as well. “I was curious why the distribution of mana beneath the ground was so lopsided, but I never imagined the larger sandworms would live solely in locations that had high densities of mana.”

The rest of the exploration team was watching the two of us from a distance, but we didn't pay them any mind.

“Master, doesn't this density map look familiar?”

“Indeed, it looks identical to the magical web Draulight's Legacy was attempting to create! Your hypothesis was correct. I'm sure if we converted this map into a numerical formula, it would match the spell perfectly. This is quite fascinating.”

There was a clear organization to the mana distribution map, with a thick central trunk and thinner branches spreading out.

Master nodded in satisfaction. “At first we had too few data points to spot the pattern, but now...”

“...We’ve mapped enough of the desert to be sure of our findings,” I finished for her.

“Indeed. The data points are useless individually, but with this many the pattern is clear.”

I could tell Master was about to go into lecture mode. Since Friede’s birth, things had been so hectic that I hadn’t listened to one of her lectures in ages. Master had made dozens of discoveries in the fourteen or so years I hadn’t really had time to research, so I was looking forward to a nice, long lecture.

“I’d like to get moving again, so could you tell Veight to wrap this up?” Fumino asked one of the werewolves.

“No way. When the boss gets like this, there’s no stopping him.”

“I can’t believe he’s still this invested in his studies.”

“He’s already one of Meraldia’s best scholars. What more is there to learn?”

Shut up, peanut gallery. Compared to the researchers that existed back on Earth, I’m still an amateur.

“My dissections have made me reasonably confident that the large sandworms that lay traps and the smaller ones that chase after their prey are the same species,” Master explained. “The larger worms are simply mutations. I suspect that before they were changed, they, too, roamed the desert to seek out their prey.”

“What’s your basis for that?”

“Their organs are identical. Furthermore, the anatomy of the larger sandworms shows that they have the appendages needed for fast movement despite no longer roaming.”

“I see.”

Most people in this world believed in superstitions and legends without thinking, but Master was one of the rare few who questioned everything, and only believed in what she could prove. It was thanks to her that most of the

mysteries of this world were getting resolved.

As Master continued her lecture, some of my werewolves timidly walked up to me.

“E-Excuse me...” one of them said.

“Yeah?”

“Shouldn’t you at least eat dinner?”

Didn’t we just eat lunch? I looked around, and to my surprise, I saw that the sun was sinking beneath a sand dune. We’d been talking all day.

I hurriedly got to my feet. “Dammit! We need to make camp.”

“Don’t worry, we already took care of that. Dinner’s ready as well.”

“Thanks a lot.”

I hadn’t even noticed we’d been talking for so long. With how hard it was to get supplies in the desert, each day mattered.

“Err...you guys go ahead and start eating. I’ll explain what Master discovered over dinner.”

We ate bowls of hot stew for dinner as the night’s chill settled in. Our fuel for fires was running low, but a hot meal was important.

As we ate, I explained, “Mana is flowing into the desert from somewhere. It’s taken root underground, and the sandworms are growing massive by gorging themselves on it.”

Sandworms had originally been hunters that roamed the dunes and caught their prey by surprise. But because they had the ability to sense mana, they’d been attracted to places with higher mana density, and settled down there.

“But the sandworms absorbed so much mana that they got too big to move quickly, so they started laying traps for their prey instead.”

“So if we cut off the flow of mana into the desert, the sandworms will stop mutating?” one of the sandscales asked, and I nodded.

“Without a steady supply of mana, they won’t be able to maintain such large

bodies. The demon army can take care of the ones still left, and no new ones will be born. But I'm not so sure that's a good idea, honestly."

"Why not?"

"If we hunt down all of the predators, the creatures that used to be prey would multiply and wreak havoc on the ecosystem."

I wanted to do a thorough investigation before coming to any conclusions about how the sandworms should be handled. Even if they were dangerous creatures, they were a vital part of the desert's current ecosystem.

Master drained the heat energy from her stew and said, "Veight is correct. My studies in the forest have shown that disrupting the natural order can be dangerous—especially when mana is involved. If we remove the creatures feeding on the excess mana, it will overflow and have unpredictable consequences on the other animals. According to my research..."

"Master, save that lecture for another time."

"Oh, my apologies. At any rate, let us restrict our current objective to finding the source of the mana for now." Master grinned at me and said in a voice too quiet for anyone else to hear, "I was only able to make these discoveries thanks to the knowledge you provided me from your past life, Veight."

"Really?"

"The knowledge you possess is the culmination of many generations of research. The wisdom of the past scholars of your world is available for all to appreciate. That same wisdom is now sowing the seeds of progress in this world as well. You've done well, my disciple."

"I don't really feel like I did anything special."

In a proud voice, Master replied, "Genetics, dominant and recessive genes, convergent evolution, evolutionary pressures...even in just the field of biology, you've introduced so many revolutionary concepts. Most importantly, you've brought over a method to conduct rigorous, accurate experimentation. In many ways, you've been my master just as much as I have yours."

It did feel nice being praised by the world's greatest scholar, but I didn't feel

like I'd earned it.

"True, but I didn't do the research for any of those discoveries myself, so it's a bit embarrassing to take credit for it."

"Don't be a fool. Knowledge only has value if it is passed down. You took that knowledge that had been passed down by your forebears, and then expounded it here in this world to me, your friends, and even your daughter."

"I'm not actually sure I've done as good a job teaching her as I could have."

"Hahaha, you worry too much. Fear not, Friede is making good progress."

I sure hope so.

"I feel like we're making good progress," Friede said happily as she walked through the desert. Iori wasn't sure she agreed, but she didn't feel like arguing the point.

"Yeah," she said simply.

"Thanks to the water we got from that traveling merchant, I think we'll be able to make it. Dragonkin and grimalkin are built for the heat, and I can carry enough water for the humans and werewolves by myself." Friede hefted a barrel larger than her onto her back and grinned.

As if there would be a traveling merchant in this remote corner of the country... It was obvious to Iori that the merchant had really been one of the Heavenwatchers, but she said nothing so as to not rain on Friede's parade. Besides, she could hardly expose them if they were trying to be covert.

As she walked off with the barrel on her back, Friede said, "Everyone in Wa is so nice. The farmers we met at that village at the base of the mountain and the old hunter we saw yesterday all shared some of their supplies with us. Plus, they told us a lot of useful tips."

Those were all probably Heavenwatchers too. Iori knew Wa's geography like the back of her hand, and she highly doubted people would normally gather in such a remote region, nor would they normally be so kind. It was obvious Tokitaka had sent some Heavenwatchers to help them out. *I guess it's a good thing though, since that means now we have enough supplies for the journey.*

Not having to resupply along the way would speed things up quite a bit, but this still didn't sit right with lori.

Following behind Friede and lori were Yuhette, Shirin, and Joshua, as well as the three musketeers and the reformed bandit grimalkin. Everyone was carrying their own heavy packs, and wearing hooded cloaks to keep the sun off during the day and the chill at bay at night.

"Man, this is heavy..."

"I've got sand everywhere..."

"And it's way too hot..."

"Be careful, it's going to get really cold once night falls."

"Are we gonna be okay? What if a sandworm attacks us?"

lori turned back to the grumbling grimalkin and sighed. *When will I be able to go home?* lori's original mission had been to observe the neighboring nation's princess—as far as she was concerned, Friede was indeed a princess, being the Demon Lord's daughter and all—and evaluate her abilities. And yet, lori now found herself in the desert. *What am I doing here?* She was used to the mountains and forests of Wa, but she'd never stepped foot in the desert before. There were no decent hiding spots, and no trees or streams. Nothing but sand and rocks in all directions. It was as desolate a place as you could get.

"What a wonderful place," Shirin said, and lori gave him a doubtful look.

"You like this?"

"I do. Dragonkin's scales prevent us from losing moisture in dry regions, and our preferred habitats are deserts and rocky mountains. Looking at all this sand is soothing."

"I...see."

lori couldn't fathom it herself, but she was willing to accept demons found different climates pleasant compared to humans.

After a few more minutes of walking, Joshua called out from the rear, "Hey, we're swerving to the south! Turn right a little, we need to keep on heading northwest!"

“Ah, okay!” Friede replied with a wave of her hand. “I’m impressed you can tell our bearing so well, Joshua!”

Joshua waved back and said, “Look, you can see the mountains behind you, right?”

“Ah, you’re right!”

“This mountain range runs from east to west, so if there are mountains directly in front or behind us, it means we’ve gotten off course!”

“Gotcha!”

Friede waved again, and Joshua raised his voice to be heard over the sudden gust of wind that had started blowing.

“It’s way worse when there are no landmarks to check your heading by,” he remarked. “When that happens, you can easily veer slightly left or right without noticing. And before you know it, you’re walking in circles!”

“Got it. I’ll be careful!”

Joshua had been born in Rolmund, the land of ice and snow. The skills that helped him navigate featureless snowy plains also served to help him navigate a similarly barren desert. *There’s a pretty diverse group here. I wonder if these people are going to end up being Friede’s main advisors when she becomes Meraldia’s leader?* Iori considered each member of the group in turn.

Shirin was well-versed in military affairs, and a skilled swordsman in his own right. Moreover, he was the son of one of the demon army’s most distinguished generals. Yuhette knew a lot about society, politics, and religion. Plus, she was the granddaughter of a Sonnenlicht archbishop. Joshua was an all-around outdoorsman and a vicious fighter as well. Furthermore, he belonged to the werewolf clan in Rolmund that served as Empress Eleora’s personal guards.

Friede has all her bases covered with this group. Did the Black Werewolf King encourage these people to be her friends from the start to ensure she had a well-balanced party? Of course, Veight hadn’t actually done that, but Friede’s friends balanced each other out so perfectly that Iori couldn’t help but suspect that he might have. Friede would probably have a much harder time solving problems by herself, but thanks to her three friends, she can handle a wide

variety of issues with ease. I can see why her father allowed her to come here without him.

When they'd fought the bandits, their teamwork had been impeccable as well. Meanwhile, Iori had just gotten in the way and needed to be rescued by Friede, which had resulted in Friede getting hurt.

Ugh... Thinking back to her failure made Iori depressed. *I'll definitely show her how cool the Heavenwatchers can be next time.* Iori's preferred weapons of choice were her pistol and the caltrops she carried with her. The theory was to use the caltrops to slow her foes down, then take them out with her pistol. However, she'd never actually been in a real fight, so she had no way of knowing how well that strategy would work in practice. *I wish some enemy would show up so I can prove that I'm useful too...*

Suddenly, Friede came to a halt, snapping Iori out of her thoughts.

"Wait," she said, looking around.

Joshua shouted, "Something's not right!"

Shirin and Iori drew their respective weapons. The grimalkin glanced around worriedly.

"What's happening?"

"Hiboshi, do you sense anything?"

"Nope. You got anything, Nijiru?"

"It's too dry here for me to try that hard..."

Iori couldn't sense anything out of the ordinary either, but then...

Joshua shouted, "Below us!"

A second later, a geyser of sand erupted in front of the party and something leapt out at them.

"Shaaaaa!"

"Whoa!" Iori screamed as she stumbled backwards, falling on her rear.

Am I going to die?! Iori saw her life flash before her eyes, but then the thing that had leapt out jumped over her and headed straight for Friede. It looked like

a giant snake, except without scales. Upon closer inspection, lori realized it looked more like a worm.

What the heck is that?! It was massive, with jaws big enough to swallow a human whole.

“It’s a sandworm! One of the smaller types!” Friede shouted, deftly dodging out of the worm’s way. She made it look so effortless.

That’s one of the small ones?!

“Friede!” Shirin shouted, running over as the sandworm burrowed underground again.

“Where did it go?!” one of the grimalkin asked.

“I dunno but I’m scaaaared!”

While they panicked, lori quickly drew her pistol and attached the fuse. *I-It dived below, right?! Is that where it’s going to attack from too?! lori reflexively threw out her caltrops, but immediately after, she realized they’d be useless against an enemy like this. What was the point of that?! An enemy that attacks from underground isn’t going to step on caltrops! What the heck am I doing?! I should be using my gun!* Realizing she hadn’t even lit its fuse, lori hurriedly took out her flint and struck some sparks. Now she was ready to fire at any time.

But it was now that she realized her second mistake.

If I point the pistol down, the bullet will just roll out! There was nothing affixing the lead bullet in her pistol in place. Firing straight down was something her pistol wasn’t designed to do. *I don’t even know where a sandworm’s vitals are, and I doubt I can take it down in one shot unless I hit a vital organ... Wait, are all my weapons completely useless here?* She had a small gunpowder bomb in her satchel, but that was more for surprising people than actually doing damage. It wasn’t terribly powerful either. Chances were it wouldn’t do anything at all against the sandworm.

Worried, lori shouted, “F-Friede?!”

“Don’t move!” Friede was staring at the ground as though she could see right through the sand. “Here it comes!”

She jumped back right as the sandworm popped up underneath her.

“*Shaaaaa!*” The sandworm flailed in the air for a few seconds before diving back underground.

“How are we supposed to fight something like that?!”

“It’s fine, calm down, lori!”

“H-Huh?! O-Okay...” Realizing she’d been waving her pistol around, lori hurriedly pointed it away. At least that way, she wouldn’t accidentally hit her allies if she pulled the trigger.

Friede grinned at her and said, “lori, you’ve got a bomb with you, right? Can you get it ready?”

“But it’s not powerful enough to kill something big!”

“I’m not going to use it to attack. The shock wave from the explosion will make the sandworm think there’s some large prey walking around.”

“Wha?!”

lori knew that most underground hunters used vibrations to track their aboveground prey. It was something all Heavenwatchers learned. *I can’t believe I forgot something so simple...*

Calming herself down, lori deftly drew her bomb and attached a lighted fuse to it. Meanwhile, Friede started giving the grimalkin orders.

“Get your nets ready! Once the bomb explodes, we’re gonna trap it with them!”

“Will our nets be enough?!”

“Even if it tears through a few, it’s fine!”

“G-Got it!”

The grimalkin got into pairs and readied their throwing nets. Though they were weak individually, they could combine their strength to throw at least as far as a human could.

As soon as they were ready, Shirin shouted, “Lady lori, we don’t want the sun at its back!”

“Got it! It’ll explode at the count of three!” Realizing she hadn’t been paying attention to the direction she’d been throwing in, lori turned around. It’d be difficult to aim properly with the sun’s glare in their eyes. Meanwhile, Joshua hefted Yuhette onto his shoulder.

“We can’t have it targeting you,” he said simply.

“Thanks.”

lori would be in danger if she was targeted as well, but she was focused on her bomb for now. This was her one chance to make up for her failures.

The worm went after Friede again, and she once again jumped out of the way.

“lori!” she shouted.

“On it!” As the sandworm dived back down, lori threw the bomb a short distance away.

“One! Two! *Three!*” As soon as lori finished counting, the bomb exploded with a high-pitched screech. A second later, the grimalkin cast their throwing nets.

“*Shaaaaa!*”

The sandworm leapt out just in time to get entangled in the nets. It tried to dive back underground, but ended up writhing helplessly on the sand. The nets had done their job.

“*Shaaaaa?!!*”

“Did...we get it?!” lori took aim with her pistol, but she wasn’t sure where to shoot it. She wavered between trying to shoot its mouth or some other segment of its body. However, Friede didn’t hesitate at all.

“There!” she shouted, drawing a pistol with a distinctly different design from lori’s and firing. A ball of pure light sliced through the veil of sand around the worm and hit it in the center of its body. The resulting explosion ripped the worm in half.

“*Shaaaaa!*”

“Whoa!”

Both halves of the worm continued to struggle, desperately trying to crawl

their way over to Friede.

“Not on my watch!” Iori leapt forward and fired at its head. Flintlock pistols weren’t known for their accuracy, but Iori was too good of a shot to miss at this distance. Unfortunately, it looked like her bullet did basically no damage to the worm. Small insects were already quite sturdy, and a larger one like this was armored enough to shrug off metal projectiles. Iori gritted her teeth in frustration.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” Joshua said, throwing Yuhette into the air.

“Huh?! Wait, wait, wait! Waaaaaah!” Panicking, Iori hurriedly caught Yuhette before she fell to the ground. The young girl was surprisingly heavy. Meanwhile, Joshua transformed and tackled the sandworm head-on. Once he’d gotten in close, he started pounding away with his fists.

“Die, die, die, die, die, die, dieeeeeee!” Joshua’s fists were like mallets, but they tore through the sandworm’s weakest sections with surprising precision. He wielded them like a blade master would his sword. In seconds, the sandworm was beaten to a bloody pulp and stopped moving. It still twitched occasionally, but it was most certainly dead.

Werewolves really are terrifying... Ah, what happened to the sandworm’s tail?! Iori hurriedly turned back around, but Shirin had already sliced the tail into three. There was beauty in his efficient swordsmanship.

“Dragonkin are amazing...” one of the grimalkin said as Shirin gracefully sheathed his blades.

“For both people and monsters, it’s our muscles that allow us to move. But all muscles can do is stretch and contract. If you slice through those muscle fibers, any and all creatures can be rendered powerless.”

He cut through the worm’s muscle fibers? Iori was dumbfounded. She had never imagined that people and monsters could be defeated in the same way.

Shirin looked down at the sandworm’s corpse and nodded to himself. “As long as you cut vertically through its muscles, it can’t move. I wonder if horizontal cuts will fare just as well. I should test that next time.”

He’s already thinking about the next opponent? Then again, there’s no telling

when we might get attacked again, so he's got the right idea.

Yuhette scanned their surroundings, then said, "I think we're safe for now. Thank you very much for catching me, Iori."

"Ah, umm..."

Iori awkwardly set Yuhette down on the ground. The battle had ended before she'd even finished processing what had happened. The massive sandworm was dead, and there were no other nearby threats. It creeped her out how the worm's dead body was still pulsing and twitching though.

"Is it...really over?"

"Yep, we're safe now," Friede said cheerfully, holstering her Blast Pistol and hiding it with her coat.

Shirin looked over at her and said, "You've gotten a lot better at aiming since returning from Rolmund."

"That technological exchange must have worked, I guess. Ryucco really went all-out on modifying it," Friede replied with a smile.

Meanwhile, Iori was down in the dumps. *I was useless again...* A battle with an enemy was exactly the chance Iori had been hoping for to restore her honor. Though she'd trained as a ninja, she was better at combat than stealth. And yet, she hadn't been of any use in this battle. It galled her to no end.

While she was stewing in regret, Friede walked over and said, "Iori, mind coming with me to that sand dune?"

"Huh...?" Iori looked up and saw Friede blushing a little as she scratched her head awkwardly.

"I want to let everyone take a break, but we need to keep a lookout in case other sandworms appear. I'm not sure I can handle watch duty on my own, so can you come with me?"

There was no reason for Iori to say no, so she nodded.

"Of course."

The two of them marched up the sand dune with some difficulty. Loose sand

didn't make for the greatest foothold, and each step sapped a lot of stamina—especially with the slope being so steep. However, the view from the top of the sand dune made all the effort worth it.

“Wow...” Friede spun around, a beaming smile on her face. “This is amazing! There's nothing but sand and sky as far as the eye can see!”

“This is a desert after all.”

“Ah, but in this direction, you can see Wa's mountains!”

“They're easier to spot from a height, yes.”

Iori's replies were curt. The view was indeed spectacular. There was nothing but sand, sky, and Friede next to her. It felt like they were the only two people left in a barren, alien world. *If I was stranded somewhere with Friede, I'd probably just be dead weight. It'd be easier for her to survive on her own.* Frustration welled up within Iori again. Loathe though she was to admit it, Friede really would be better off without her.

Suddenly, Friede peered into her face and asked, “Hey, are you okay, Iori? You look kinda down...”

“No, I don't. I'm fine.”

Iori was pretty sure her current feelings weren't showing on her face. She *had* trained as a ninja, after all. Unfortunately for her, Friede didn't need to read faces to know how a person was feeling.

“But I can smell the depression on you.”

“There you go again, sniffing my feelings out. You can't just smell people without permission.”

Friede had explained before that humans were always sweating at least a little, and their sweat varied based on their emotions. Since werewolves were demons who'd evolved to hunt humans, they were extremely good at telling apart those subtle differences in sweat.

Looking apologetic, Friede said, “I'm sorry. If it was something I was seeing, I could just close my eyes, but I can't exactly block my nose...”

“Bwah?!” Iori let out something between a gasp of surprise and a laugh.

Holding in the urge to chuckle, she said in a serious voice, “I-I suppose smell is something you do just passively notice.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I couldn’t help but notice you were feeling down.” Friede sounded genuinely worried for lori. “You helped out a ton during that fight, you know? But despite that, you’re feeling depressed, and I can’t tell why...so I asked.”

“Helped out a ton? I didn’t do anything at all.” A dry gust of wind ruffled lori’s hair, and she pushed her bangs out of her face. “You’re the one who thought up a plan on how to defeat the sandworm, and directed everyone through it. I just did as I was told, and threw a bomb.”

Friede firmly shook her head. “There’s way more to it than that. You’re the one who always carries around a ready-to-use bomb, and you’ve practiced with it enough that you didn’t miss even in a tense situation.”

In a way, Friede did have a point. And for once, lori kind of liked the praise. But she was contrarian to the bone.

“It’s only natural to master the tools of your trade. I may be new to my post, but I’m trusted by my superiors enough to be given formal missions still. Any Heavenwatcher could have done what I did,” she retorted, biting her lip. “Besides...even though it’s my tool, I didn’t realize it could be used as bait until you pointed it out. I was *useless*.”

Friede worriedly peered into lori’s eyes, then said in a gentle voice, “If you hadn’t been there, lori, we would have had to fight the sandworm without being able to lure it out. Can you really say you were useless even though you were integral to our victory?”

“Like I said, anyone with a bomb could have done it. In fact, even Okoge carries bombs on him. You could have asked for his help instead.”

“O-Oh...” Friede didn’t know how to respond to that.

I’m so useless I’m even making Friede worry about me, lori thought. Unable to stand how pathetic she was, lori sank to her knees.

“Just drop it. I’m not as strong as a werewolf, nor do I have the analytical ability of a *real* Heavenwatcher. No one would blame you for thinking I’m a

failure who's only barely managed to scrape by so far."

"But I don't think that..." Friede said, waving her arms frantically. But that only made lori feel more miserable.

"During that fight with the bandits, I got in your way and caused you to get so hurt you passed out. It's not physically possible to be more useless than me."

"Oh, come on, that wasn't your fault," Friede affirmed, sitting down next to lori.

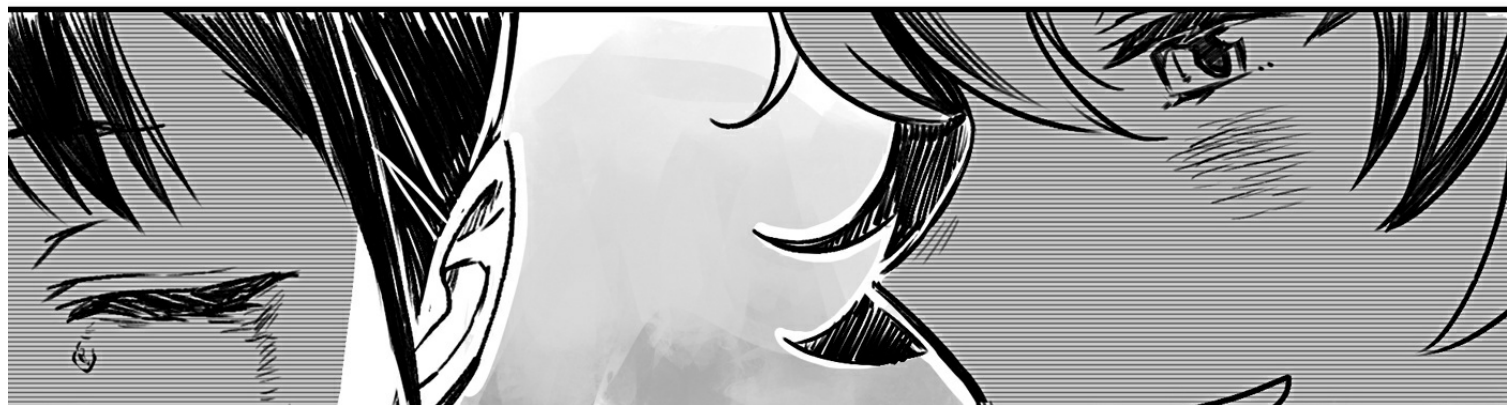
"It was. I'm worthless! I hate to admit it, but I really haven't done anything to help you at all! I'm an embarrassment to the Mihoshi name!" Now that the dam had burst, the words came out in a torrent. "But what can I do?! Until I was nine, I worked in a brothel as an errand girl! My parents racked up such a huge gambling debt that they sold me off when I was a baby! I don't even remember what they look like! Even they thought I was useless!"

"I-lori, what's gotten into you?!"

"I don't know! I don't know and I don't care! I'm not done yet, so shut up and listen!" lori grabbed Friede by the shoulders. "Later, I found out the slavers who had bought me had been caught in faraway Meraldia! By the *daughter* of the Black Werewolf King! When she was only seven!"

Bweh?!" Friede yelped as lori shook her back and forth.

"I had nothing! No noble family lineage, no parents! But even so, I struggled and struggled to become like you! After all, now I'm the adopted daughter of the head of the Mihoshi family! I need to prove I deserve that position!"



Friede's expression was stiff, but she was still intently studying lori's expression.

"lori..."

"But I can't do this anymore! No matter how hard I try, I'll never match up to nobles who've had gifted educations from birth, or werewolves who are stronger than me! I just don't have what it takes! No one should expect anything from me!"

lori burst out into heaving sobs.

"I...I can't... I just can't... I'm just a lowly commoner...a girl who was sold as a slave..."

She crouched down and hugged her knees. A few seconds later, she felt the warmth of Friede's arms envelop her.

Friede gently patted lori's back and said, "You're more amazing than you realize, lori. I didn't know you had such a rough past, but I think I have a better idea of what kind of person you are now." Friede put a hand on lori's shoulder and added, "I think you're a perfectly good Heavenwatcher. When we sparred, I could tell you were strong. You're fluent in Meraldian, and a very kind person. You're even pretty too."

"That's not true at all..."

"It's true about the lori that I see." lori was too scared to look up, but she could tell from Friede's voice that she was probably smiling. "I was born to a normal family that took care of me, and didn't struggle at all growing up."

I wouldn't exactly call your family normal... lori thought. Indeed, Friede's mother was the first human Demon Lord in history, and her father was the demon army's greatest general. Their family was the furthest thing from normal.

"But even though you suffered so much more than I did, you've made it this far. You're more amazing than I am by a lot."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah!"

lori couldn't bring herself to believe that in the slightest, but the praise did make her feel better.

"You're really good at buttering people up, Friede."

"I got praised for everything I did, so I'm really good at praising others!" Friede puffed her chest out proudly. "Dad always tells me, 'Those born as humans have human problems, and those born as werewolves have werewolf problems. Since you're half-werewolf and half-human, you'll have to deal with both sides' problems. But it's precisely because you'll have to struggle so much that you'll learn how to be kind to others.' Admittedly, I haven't really struggled all that much though."

It was then that lori realized something. *There's no way a half-human half-demon child could have grown up with no struggles at all.* Friede looked human, but you only had to spend five minutes with her to realize she wasn't. And though she had werewolf blood running through her veins, she couldn't transform. She belonged to both species at once, while also being neither. As far as lori knew, there were no other half-werewolves in the world.

Unaware of the epiphany lori just had, Friede continued talking.

"If anything, my dad's probably struggled more because of—actually, never mind."

"Hm?"

Veight was a werewolf who'd led his people into human society while adhering to humans' rules. If anyone deserved to say they had dealt with both demon and human problems, it was him. At least, that's how lori saw it. However, Friede seemed to be panicking that she'd let that slip, so lori suspected there was something more to it. She was enjoying their current conversation though, and didn't pry too deeply.

Everyone Friede had met in Wa had become her ally. She hadn't done it on purpose, but just by being herself, she'd made it here to the Windswept Dunes with lori and a group of grimalkin in tow. It was strange, really. *I guess that's proof that Friede really is just naturally suited to lead. But when I first met her, I hadn't even been able to notice that.* Thinking back to how she'd mentally filed Friede away as an ignorant princess at first, lori blushed. It was embarrassing

how blind she'd been.

Looking up, she met Friede's gaze and said, "Friede, I'm sorry."

"Huh? Why? What for?" Friede waved her hands around in confusion, not expecting an apology.

Ready to face whatever punishment Friede saw fit to mete out, lori said, "I originally thought you were an ignorant, pampered princess who didn't know a thing about real hardship. Just another weak successor basking in their parents' authority and living the high life."

"Uhh, well, you were half-right, so I guess it's all good!" Friede gave lori a thumbs-up. She didn't mind lori's assessment one bit.

Shaking her head, lori replied, "But I was wrong! You're amazing... I honestly respect you from the bottom of my heart. I was a fool for not noticing it at first. My own inferiority complex and desire to prove I was better than you blinded me to the truth." lori hung her head again. "I'm the Mihoshi family's successor...and I've been training all this time to become the next head of the Heavenwatchers. But as I am now, I don't deserve to lead others. I bet my father would be disappointed in me."

"I really don't think he would..."

Friede sat down in front of lori and closed her eyes.

"Yeah...it looks like there aren't any sandworms nearby. I thought they'd be attracted to me, but I guess they're too far away."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember how the sandworm from before kept attacking me? That's probably because it was drawn to my mana. I can't think of any other reason."

"That makes sense. It couldn't possibly be because you looked the tastiest or anything," lori said with a small smile, and Friede chuckled.

"I think that's the first time you've told a joke."

"I wasn't joking," lori replied with a straight face, then blushed as she realized the mild innuendo behind what she'd said. *Come to think of it, I don't really joke much, huh? I never realized that.*

Still smiling, Friede said, “I figured if I stayed here at the top of the sand dunes, any sandworms would come to me instead of the others, keeping them safe.”

“So that’s why you came all the way out here.” Iori was impressed for a moment, but then she cocked her head and asked, “Wait, but then what about me?”

“Well, if I have your bombs, it’s that much easier to shoot a sandworm down. I thought as long as I had you with me, I’d be able to handle anything that showed up. Besides...” Blushing a little, Friede scratched the back of her head. “I feel safer with you around.”

Wha?! Iori was so stunned she was at a loss for words. *This girl really is too much.* Iori knelt on one knee and bowed to Friede.

“Friede. No, *Master* Friede.”

“Huh?! What?!”

“I wish to serve under you. If you have no use for me as a spy, I will gladly serve as a guard, or even a maid. But please, take me back to Meraldia with you.”

“What the heck is going on?!” Friede began to panic a little as Iori bowed even deeper.

“With my meager talents, I will surely only disappoint my father. I’m not fit to inherit the Mihoshi family. But I would like to at least be of some use to you.”

“Hang on. Let’s calm down for a second, okay?”

Friede grabbed Iori by the shoulders and said with a bashful smile, “I’m glad you think so highly of me, but I want to be your friend, not your master.”

“My friend?! Gladly! We’ll be best friends!”

“You’re coming on a little strong here...” Friede took a few steps backwards, but she was smiling. “All right, Iori. From today on, we’re best friends! But friends don’t call each other by stuffy titles like ‘Master’ or ‘Lady,’ so you better just call me Friede!”

“If you say so... I guess I was already doing it before, so it should be okay.”

Fidgeting in embarrassment, Friede looked up at lori and asked, “Why don’t you try it right now?”

“Okay, Friede.” lori kept a straight face, but internally she was screaming. *Wow... Wow, wow, wow!* Somehow, calling Friede by her name had suddenly become the most exciting thing for lori. *We’re just talking in the middle of the desert, but everything feels so wonderful!* It felt like lori’s entire world had changed, even though arguably nothing had really happened.

“Anyway since we’re already here, why don’t we keep talking for a bit longer?” Friede said, still smiling.

“That’s fine with me,” lori replied with as stoic a nod as she could muster.

The two of them sat there atop the sand dune and talked for a long time.

“Because the Heavenwatchers rescued us, me and the other children didn’t get shipped off. Some of the others were lucky enough to be able to return to their parents, but I didn’t even know where my parents were.”

“So Lord Tokitaka ended up adopting you.” Friede nodded in understanding, but then gave lori a questioning look. “By the way, you said before that you don’t like udon, right?”

“I’m surprised you remembered that.”

“Does it have anything to do with the horrible stuff you experienced as a kid?”

Sighing, lori nodded. “Yes... After we were rescued, my father treated me to some udon. I was starving, so I ate it as fast as I could. And when I was done, I started crying.”

“Why?”

“At the time...I thought I might get sold off again because I couldn’t afford to pay for the udon.”

It was a shameful memory. But Friede didn’t laugh at lori. In fact, she took lori’s hand and squeezed it tight.

“It’s okay.”

“What’s okay?”

“It’s just okay.”

Friede nodded confidently to lori, then hugged her.

“Everything’s okay now.”

“I mean, I know that. My life’s a lot better now.” Despite lori’s protests though, she felt comforted by Friede’s hug. *Yeah, I guess everything is okay now, huh...*

Friede moved her hands so she was grabbing lori’s shoulders and said, “Me, Fumino, Okoge, and probably even Lord Tokitaka all care a lot about you, lori.”

“I’m not so sure about my father. If I don’t show that I’m a worthy successor, he might abandon—”

“He won’t.” Friede squeezed lori’s shoulders hard. “If he really cared so little about you, he wouldn’t give you this much freedom. It’s because he treasures you that he’s not trying to tie you to him.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to keep the people you care about close?”

“Sometimes, yes. But not always. That’s what my dad says, anyway. He said that part of him wants me to always be with him at home, but he knows I should see the world for myself.”

Is that really how parental love works? lori wasn’t really sure, but since her new best friend was convinced, she decided to take Friede at her word.

Friede gave lori a wan smile and added, “But when all’s said and done, I know my dad goes out of his way to make life easier for me. When I went to Rolmund, I met friends of his everywhere, and they all helped me out.”

“The Black Werewolf King is the legendary foreigner who put the Originia family in power, after all. I’m not surprised he has friends in Rolmund.”

“Really?”

Despite being Veight’s daughter, Friede seemed oddly ignorant of his accomplishments. *Maybe it’s precisely because she’s his daughter that she doesn’t know as much. Come to think of it, that might be true for me and my*

father as well. Iori thought back to what she knew about Tokitaka. As she pored over her memories, she opened up to Friede about her biggest fear.

“I want to believe in my father, I truly do. He’s the only real parent I’ve ever had. And he’s been good to me. But...” She let out a long sigh. “I can’t tell if he truly cares about me or not. And that worries me.”

“The Heavenwatchers are all spies, so I guess you guys get a little paranoid...”

“Yes, exactly. He’s not very open about his feelings either. If he was, then maybe I’d know how he truly feels.”

Tokitaka was the head of Wa’s premier spy organization, so Iori naturally assumed each and every one of his actions had some deep meaning behind it, no matter how trivial it seemed. And this was why no matter how kindly Tokitaka treated her, Iori couldn’t help but think there was some ulterior motive behind it all.

“I wonder if father even expects anything from me?”

“Well, he put you in charge of watching over me instead of Fumino, so he probably trusts you quite a bit.”

“I sure hope so.” Iori just couldn’t bring herself to trust her father as much as Friede did hers.

This time it was Friede’s turn to sigh.

“I get how you feel, Iori. Your dad’s a big deal, so you’re not sure how to act around him. My mom’s the Demon Lord, so I get scared around her sometimes too...”

“If you ask me, you should be more scared of your dad than your mom.”

Of course, the Demon Lord was plenty important in her own right, but Friede’s father was the legendary Black Werewolf King. The man who’d defeated a Hero, and changed history everywhere he went.

Friede nodded in agreement and said, “Yeah. Back in the day, dad always called himself a lowly councilor, and that was pretty bad. Lies like that aren’t good to tell your kids.”

“I’ve heard that Lord Veight is surprisingly humble despite his many notable

accomplishments. But when you take it as far as he does, it just becomes toxic humility.”

Friede nodded again. “Exactly! Every time someone praises him, he just blows it off and says it was because he was lucky to be born with a few extra advantages—and that it was all only possible thanks to the help of his comrades! Can you believe it?! He took down a Valkaan in single combat, fought back an army of three thousand at Zaria, destroyed the corrupt Senate, served as vice-commander to three different Demon Lords—and in Rolmund he...did a bunch of stuff. Kuwol too.”

At some point, Friede got tired of listing her father’s accomplishments, and just summed the rest up. Considering the insane amount of things Veight had done, it was hardly surprising she got tired of listing them all.

“Thanks to that, everyone expects all these great things from *me* because I’m his daughter. It’s so annoying hearing about how amazing my dad is no matter where I go. And then whenever I *do* manage to accomplish anything, everyone compares me to my dad again, and I just feel inadequate.”

“Being the daughter of a legend isn’t easy...” lori had been jealous of Friede at first, but now she felt like she understood Friede’s struggles a bit more. Having too high of expectations placed upon you was just as much of a problem as having people expect nothing of you.

Down below, the two of them could see Yuhette discussing something with the others. lori couldn’t hear what she was saying, but she was sure Friede could. A werewolf’s senses were far sharper than a human’s.

“By the way...” lori said, looking out towards the horizon. She was about to suggest it was time they got moving again, but then she sensed something off. *That sand dune in the distance looks strange...but I can’t get a clear enough look at it.*

“What’s up, lori?”

“Look at the top of that sand dune over there to the west. Doesn’t it look like there’s something off about it?”

“I can’t see anything, but...” Friede tried looking at it through a telescope,

then shook her head. She handed the telescope over to lori and said, “Do you have superhuman sight or something? All I see is the same old sand.”

“I’m not sure if it’s particularly better than average, but I did go through training to help me see further.” lori tried peering through the telescope, but the sand in the air and the mirages caused by reflections from the sun made it difficult to make anything out. However, she was now certain there was *something* on top of that sand dune.

Friede put a hand on lori’s shoulder. “I’ll cast strengthening magic on your eyes to help you out. Let me know if it starts to hurt.”

“Huh?!”

A second later, lori’s vision became a lot clearer.

“Oh, that’s—”

—Grand Magus Kite—

As I put on my coat, I let out a long sigh.

“Surely I can put off the investigation of the Windswept Dunes until later. A few months won’t hurt.”

“But you’re looking forward to this, aren’t you?” Lacy says, and I cough awkwardly.

“I mean, Veight did ask for me personally, so yeah. Anyway, you make sure you get as much rest as possible, okay? You’ll collapse if you push yourself too hard.”

“Hey, that’s my line. I’m in a lot better shape than you are.” Lacy stretches to show off just how much energy she has left.

“Whoa, there. Avoid strenuous motions, remember?! You’re pregnant!” I shout in a panic.

“Oh, come on. This is my second time. I’m used to it now.”

“That’s no reason to throw caution to the wind! Light, you say something to your mother too!”

My son, who was busy poring over a monster encyclopedia, turns around and

says in an innocent voice, "I'll make sure mom doesn't push herself!"

"That's my boy." I affectionately ruffle his hair. He takes after me both in looks and personality. That can be a problem sometimes, but at least it means he's as much of a nag as I am.

Lacy frowns and says, "Light's even more strict than you are."

"That's because you're always so careless. Me and Light have to look after you. Isn't that right?"

"Yep! When I get older, I'm gonna marry a girl like you, mom, so I need to get as much practice as I can now."

"Er, are..." I swallow my words. *Are you sure that's what you want, kid? It's gonna be tough.* But instead of asking that, I just nod. "That's the spirit. It's a hard life, so make sure you get used to it now."

"Aren't you two being a little too mean to me?" Lacy asks with a sigh, rubbing her stomach. "I hope our next kid is more like I am..."

"It's going to be a girl, right?" Light asks, and I nod.

"Epoch magic has come a long way in the past decade, and we can even use it to determine a baby's gender now. She's definitely gonna be your sister."

"Then I gotta make sure I'm a good brother!" Light says confidently, and I pat his head again.

"I know you will. But don't push yourself too hard either, or you'll end up like I did when I was your age."

"How did you end up?"

"I'll tell you when you're older." I slip on my backpack. "All right, I'm off."

"Be careful out there, dad!"

Light's a worrywart, so he gets worried even on safe trips like this one.

I give him my best approximation of Veight's reassuring smile and reply, "Don't worry, Jerrick's going to be with me. He'll take care of any sandworms that show up."

I'll be fine. Probably.

“Wow...” Friede gazed up in wonder. “I know ‘built his house on sand’ is a saying in Wa, but I’ve never seen a house made *of* sand. Actually, this is more like a castle of sand, isn’t it?”

Indeed, Friede was looking up at a towering castle built of sand in the middle of the desert. The walls looked surprisingly sturdy, and it was impossible to see what was behind them.

Brushing a few grains of sand out of her hair, Friede cocked her head and asked, “Is this the holy land the grimalkin’s dance was referring to?”

“Seems a bit shoddy for that to me,” Okoge muttered, and the reformed bandits nodded in agreement.

Shirin stood protectively in front of Yuhette and scanned his surroundings.

“But who would build such a thing?” Shirin asked.

“And how did they get the sand to harden like this?” Yuhette poked the wall with her staff, testing its hardness. “These walls remind me of those sun-dried mud bricks some people use. But no matter how much I scrape at it, not a grain of sand comes off. It must’ve been hardened through a special method.”

That gave Friede an idea, and she asked, “Yuhette, your dad’s an architect, right?”

“Yes, that’s why I know so much about construction. But I haven’t seen a structure like this before.”

“I see. I’ve got an idea we can try.”

Friede focused her senses on her fingertips, and lightly brushed the wall.

“Ah!”

She’d barely touched the wall, but a hole had opened up inside it. Loose sand spilled from the opening.

“I know what hardened the sand. It’s mana.”

“What did you do?!” Iori exclaimed in surprise, and Friede tried to explain it as simply as possible.

“I was born with the ability to absorb mana. So I touched the wall, intending

to absorb any mana in it, and it broke apart like that.”

“I didn’t know mana could be used for building. But who made something like this, and why?” Joshua asked, and Friede shook her head.

“No clue. But we won’t find out just standing out here, so let’s go inside.”

She grinned and stuck her whole hand into the wall to widen the hole.

Once the hole was wide enough, the party walked through it.

“It’s all sand on the inside too.”

“Looks like there are walls and corridors, no rooms.”

“Is this some kinda maze?”

“It definitely doesn’t feel like any sort of ‘holy land.’”

The grimalkin muttered amongst themselves, worried.

The inside of the castle consisted of steep walls that formed branching corridors, and nothing else. It looked neither like a residence nor a fortress, and it really could only be described as a maze. There were magic circles laid out on the ground at regular intervals as well, meaning it was a maze built by a mage.

Iori kept her matchlock pistol drawn and constantly scanned her surroundings. Drawing close to Friede, she whispered, “I highly doubt this is the holy land. I think we should have Hiboshi scout out ahead.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

Hiboshi, who had been close enough to hear the exchange, nodded. “Stealth’s what I’m good at. I’ll clamber up one of these walls and get a good look at what’s going on.”

“Ah, thanks.” Friede gave Hiboshi a small bow.

“Okay, here we go,” Hiboshi said. “Hey, you failed ninjas. Are any of y’all confident in your skills? I need three to come with me.”

“You can’t order us around!”

“Yeah, you tell him!”

Despite their complaining, three of the reformed bandits did indeed follow after Hiboshi.

The castle turned out to be completely empty, and the scouts returned with confused looks on their faces.

“The whole place is spotless, like someone just cleaned it seconds ago,” Hiboshi explained. “Normally there’d be piles of sand everywhere...and I mean there are, but like, not in the way you’d expect if the place was neglected. But there’s nothing else here.”

The other grimalkin nodded in agreement. Friede folded her arms and lapsed into thought.

“You’d need a spell of some kind to attach the mana to sand like this. But mana’s a vital resource for mages. No one would use it for frivolous stuff. Maybe whoever did this attached the mana to the sand so the mana wouldn’t disperse into the atmosphere? It’s pretty densely packed here.”

Shirin nodded thoughtfully. “I see. They aren’t using the mana to harden the sand, but instead, using the sand to keep the mana here. And the hardening just happens to be a byproduct. In which case, we should proceed with caution.”

“Why?” one of the former grimalkin bandits asked.

“Friede just said mana is an important resource, didn’t she?” Shirin replied in exasperation. “That means whatever mage is gathering this mana plans to do something with it. This is an important treasury for them.”

Iori raised a hand and said, “In that case, I’ll take the lead. We can’t allow Friede to be exposed to danger.”

“Hmm...” After thinking about it for a few seconds, Friede shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. If we’re up against a mage, you all should stick close to me. I know you’re confident in your fighting skills, but they won’t help you much against a strong mage.”

Friede tapped the sandy floor with her toes.

“Plus, if this is a maze made of magic, it means the person who made it can

manipulate it at will. I'm the only one who can sense shifts in mana flows, so you should stay by me."

"That's...a good point. You're the most experienced with magic among us, so we'll follow your lead," Yuhette said, and everyone else nodded.

The party resumed walking, and after a bit, Hiboshi said, "This maze's layout is identical to the streets of Wa's capital. It's even got all the small alleyways and everything. What the heck is this?"

"So it's modeled after the city? Wa's capital... Wa's holy land..." Friede muttered, folding her arms again. "I think I get it. The holy land in the desert is supposed to be an important place, right?"

"I mean, yeah, otherwise Lord Ason wouldn't have told us to pass it down through the generations, right?" Nijiru said.

"You said there's a lot of mana here, yeah? I don't fully understand, but would this be like a mage's treasure trove?" Okoge asked.

"Basically, yeah. I don't think I could even use this much mana, at least not at once. There's gotta be thousands of kites' worth just floating around here."

An average human had about 1 kite of mana. Mages or people born with magical talent, who'd trained for a very long time, could go up to a few kites, but that was the limit for humans. One kite was enough to power two or three shots from a Blast Rifle. A few thousand kites was enough to decimate an army.

As Friede explained as much to everyone, Yuhette said, "There's clearly something big going on here. I think we have a duty to report this to the Chrysanthemum Court, and also the Commonwealth Council back home. We should head back for now."

"You're right. If we go missing here, there won't be anyone left to tell Wa and Meraldia about this potential threat." But even as Friede said that, something nagged at her.

She had a feeling she shouldn't return just yet. There was no logical explanation for why she felt that, but something in the back of her mind said she was still missing something important here. *Professor Mitty did say that premonitions are an important part of using prediction magic. Not that I can use*

prediction magic, but... The rational decision would be to turn back and report what they'd found to the Chrysanthemum Court.

"All right." Friede came to a decision. "Hiboshi, I want you and your musketeer companions to go and report to the Chrysanthemum Court."

Hiboshi nodded immediately. "Sounds good to me. We'll be taking Lady Iori back with us too. She is our boss's beloved successor, after all."

Iori, however, shook her head and said, "I'm staying here."

"Seriously?!"

"I need to stay with Friede," Iori said in a determined voice, then blushed and added, "If this maze resembles the streets of the capital, she'll need someone who knows the capital well to help her navigate."

"Oh yeah, good point. Thanks, Iori!" Friede said cheerfully.

"It's nothing..." Iori mumbled, blushing even harder.

Okoge and his two companions folded their arms behind their heads and sighed in unison.

"Man, Friede's totally seduced you, hasn't she?"

"How are we supposed to tell the boss about this?"

"Eh, I'm sure he won't mind. Lady Iori needs friends her own age anyway." Nijiru grinned, then turned to Friede. "Take good care of our princess, okay?"

"Got it. I'll make sure she gets home safe and sound," Friede replied with a smile.

And so, the three musketeers split off from the group and started heading back to Wa, with twelve grimalkin still remaining. Friede split them up into groups of three, and sent them off to scout in the four cardinal directions.

"Groups of three, huh?" Iori asked after Friede gave the order, and she nodded.

"Yeah. The Heavenwatchers have the three musketeers, and it looks like grimalkin work better in groups. Dad splits his werewolves up into squads of

four himself. Three works better for grimalkin, I think, since if the group gets too big, they get lazy.”

“You understand them pretty well...”

“I mean, I saw how eager they were to take breaks...”

The two of them exchanged glances and giggled.

A short distance away, Shirin turned to Yuhette and Joshua and said, “Lady Iori has really opened up to Friede.”

“One of the best things about Friede is she can make friends with almost anyone,” Yuhette replied with a sad smile.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you, Yuhette?” Joshua said in a teasing voice.

“I won’t deny it, but I know I don’t have the right to monopolize her. Even if we are best friends.”

“Anyway!” Friede said in a loud voice, blushing. She’d heard the entire conversation, and was hoping to change the subject by organizing everything they’d found out so far. “So, we know this maze resembles Wa’s capital, right?”

“Yes. The passages are identical to the layout of the city streets. Because there are only walls and no buildings, it was hard to tell at first, but I’m almost certain of it now,” Iori replied.

Yuhette stepped forward and asked, “Did you figure out the significance of that, Friede?”

“Yeah. Remember how we talked about how the capital of Wa is one big magic circle? The fact that its layout has been replicated here means this castle is one too. That would explain why all the sand around here is saturated with mana.” Friede nodded to herself, muttering, “Hmm...”

She took some time to study the walls and the magic circles again.

“Do you all remember how the important buildings are situated in such a way that traffic is always flowing in one direction in the capital? Obviously, it’s not perfect. And depending on the time, the direction of the flow might change, but usually, it’s going one way.”

“What’s so special about that?” Shirin asked.

“The average person has about 1 kite of mana, so if a thousand people go in a certain direction, that’s the equivalent of 1,000 kites flowing one way,” Friede replied.

“A thousand kites is a lot of mana, right?”

“Uh-huh. If this maze is actually one big magic circle, I bet walking through it in the right direction will activate the spell. Back in Meraldia’s university, students in the magic department take a course about the fusion of architecture and magic, and Wa’s capital is one of the examples brought up in that class.”

Joshua shrugged and said, “But this maze is totally deserted.”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering about that too. But I can definitely feel the flow of mana in the castle. This maze is *alive*, I’m sure of it.”

A thought suddenly came to lori, and she muttered, “The flow of mana, huh?”

“Mm-hm. So I was thinking...” But before Friede could explain further, the grimalkin came back at a dead run.

“Boss, someone’s coming!”

“I think it’s a human man! There’s only one of them!”

“He’s dressed in ancient Wa clothes!”

Friede immediately asked, “Is he armed?”

“Yeah! He’s got a katana... Actually, more of a longsword, at his waist! But no armor! And he doesn’t seem to have a pack or anything either!”

Worried, Friede muttered, “I don’t smell the scent of a human anywhere though... And wouldn’t you bring a pack with you if you were going into the middle of the desert? Does he live here or something?”

Frowning, Shirin said, “If we don’t know whether he’s friend or foe, we could just let him pass us by.”

Meanwhile, Joshua casually said, “Why don’t we just get the bastard with a surprise attack? We can beat the answers out of him after he’s caught.”

“That might fly in Rolmund, but not here,” Shirin replied coolly.

“Look, we can’t exactly expect reinforcements around here, so we may as well strike first.”

Before the two of them could start arguing, Friede said, “Let’s greet him for now.”

“Seriously?” Joshua muttered, exchanging exasperated glances with Shirin.

Friede started walking in the direction the grimalkin had come from, and sure enough, she spotted a man before long. He looked to be in his thirties, and was well-built. The man was dressed in the attire of Wa’s nobles, and he would have looked right at home with the Chrysanthemum Court. Had he actually been one of the Kushin, he would have had guards and attendants with him, but this man was alone. He should definitely have been able to see Friede, but he kept walking as if nothing was out of the ordinary. The two of them would pass each other soon.

Steeling herself, Friede stepped in front of the man to block his path, and bowed politely, introducing herself in Wa.

“Hello. I’m Friede Aindorf, from the Meraldian Commonwealth.”

The man looked Friede over, then said in ancient Wa, “Verily, thou shalt make a fine vessel.”

“Huh? Uhh, thanks?” Friede didn’t understand old Wa very well, but it sounded like the man had complimented her. At the very least, it didn’t seem like the man was an enemy, so Friede tried to keep the conversation going.

“Umm, who are you?”

“I am Ason.”

“Ason?” Friede cocked her head. “You mean, *the* Ason?”

“What Ason dost thou believe me to be?”

“The great man who built the country of Wa?”

“My, so thou hast heard of me. Thou hast mettle to appear before my presence, knowing who I am.” Ason unfurled his small folding fan, and nodded

solemnly.

Nervous, Iori walked up and asked, “A-Are you really Lord Ason?! But that can’t be! The histories say Lord Ason returned to the realm of the gods a thousand years ago...”

“Surely he can’t be the real Ason. No human could live for a thousand years, unless they were immortal,” Shirin said, looking dubiously up at the man.



“But I’ve heard that Lord Ason was a legend who regularly accomplished the impossible. He’s as famous in Wa as Lord Veight is in Meraldia,” Iori replied.

“If he’s as amazing as uncle, then I suppose it’s possible this guy might be immortal...” Shirin commented, but Friede shook her head in response.

“No way. Not even dad’s immortal. I’m pretty sure he’s gonna die before I do, at least.”

All historical records stated that Ason had lived a thousand years ago. Everyone agreed that he’d been 100% human, and not even a mage, so he shouldn’t have had any way to live this long. However, he’d been such a legend that Iori was awed just by hearing him claim to be Ason.

Friede stared at the man, thinking about her options. *Honestly, it doesn’t really matter if he’s the real Ason or not. What’s important is whether or not he’s someone we can trust.* The answer to that wasn’t too hard to puzzle out. In Meraldia, Rolmund, and Wa, Friede had met all sorts of people—both good and evil. People who seemed stern, but were actually kind; people who seemed friendly, but were actually manipulative; people who seemed coldhearted, but were actually trustworthy. Her past experiences were telling Friede that she shouldn’t trust this man.

Gazing into his eyes, she said bluntly, “You can’t be the real Ason. You don’t smell anything like a human. And it’s not just that. You don’t act or talk like a real person either.” The man said nothing, so Friede kept going. “Only people with ulterior motives approach strangers under a false identity. Well, I guess there might be a few exceptions, but...” Friede trailed off, realizing her logic wasn’t airtight. “Anyway, *who* are you, actually?”

“I am Ason,” the man replied, in the exact same tone as before.

Friede instantly became warier of him. *He’s definitely an enemy!* She gave up on attempting further conversation, and considered whether to fight or to run. *It doesn’t look like he’s going to attack unprompted, and I don’t know how strong he is! Running’s the best option here!* But just as she thought that, the man who called himself Ason raised a hand towards her.

“You have a discerning eye... How unfortunate.”

What's he doing?! Bracing herself for the worst, Friede saw something shoot out of the man's sleeve.

"A sandworm?! No, wait!" It looked similar to a sandworm, but it was actually a snake *made* of sand. The creature was clearly magical.

"Hiyaaaah!" Friede roundhouse kicked the snake, causing it to disperse. Anything made of mana could be destroyed with Friede's vortex power. Without the mana to hold the snake together, it was just a clump of sand.

"Hm?" The fake Ason looked at Friede in surprise. Before he could do anything else, the grimalkin that had been scouting atop the walls shouted, "Boss! Something's fighting nearby!"

"Who's fighting what?!" Friede asked, but the grimalkin just shook their heads.

"We can't tell from here!"

"But there's a lot of flashing lights!"

"Whoever they are, they've got weapons like yours, boss!"

Upon hearing that, Friede made a snap decision.

"Let's go, everyone!"

"Gotcha!" Joshua shouted, transforming and picking Yuhette up.

"If that's what you've decided, Friede," Shirin replied, loosening his swords in their scabbards.

"A-All right!" Iori said, readying her flintlock pistol.

"If those are flashes from Blast Rifles, whoever's fighting over there is probably friendly! They're only used by Meraldians and Rolmundians! Let's join up with them!"

"Wait, what about Lord Ason?!"

"Just ignore him, he's probably a fake! Either way, he's not our friend!"

The man said nothing, but when Friede called out that he was fake, he turned into a statue of sand, then crumbled into nothing.

“What the hell?!”

“It’s probably illusion magic of some kind. He was always nothing more than a sand statue made to look like a person. I’m pretty sure whoever cast that illusion is fighting over there right now!” Friede explained, running past the remains of the sand statue without so much as a backwards glance.

“Whoa?!”

“Wait for us, boss!”

“Don’t leave us behind!” The grimalkin hopped down and chased after Friede.

Iori ran up alongside Friede, and said, “Hey, if this maze really is laid out like Wa’s capital, then we should cut through the wall on the right here!”

“All right, I’ll smash it!” Friede wrapped a whirlpool of mana around her fist and punched the wall, absorbing enough to make a big hole through it.

“Go!” she shouted to the grimalkin.

“You got it, boss!”

They sprinted through the hole, surprisingly unafraid of whatever they might find on the other side. Friede and Iori went in next, with Shirin, Joshua, and Yuhette bringing up the rear. The sounds of battle were getting louder, which was a sign that they were close.

“Those shots sound like they’re coming from a standard-issue demon army Blast Rifle!” Friede shouted. She’d trained with them enough to recognize the sound anywhere.

“That means someone from the demon army’s here! We have to help them!” Yuhette shouted, dropping from Joshua’s arms and running up to Friede.

“Friede, you go on ahead! Joshua, go with her!”

“Got it. Thanks!”

Friede leapt up onto the top of the wall and ran at full speed along it. She could hear Joshua thudding along behind her, and the grimalkin seemed to be keeping up while maintaining a decent semblance of stealth. In fact, she could only tell they were there because of their scent.

Before long, she could hear voices in the distance.

“This isn’t looking good, Kite!”

“I know, our Blast Rifles aren’t working!”

Friede recognized both of those voices.

“That’s Jerrick and Professor Kite!”

“Let’s hurry! Should I howl to let them know we’re coming?!” Joshua asked.

“Yes, please!”

Joshua let out a howl that conveyed that allies were coming.

“Awoooooo!” A howl came back seconds later, and Joshua interpreted it for everyone.

“Yep, that’s definitely a Meraldian werewolf’s howl! They said ‘strong enemies,’ ‘hard fight,’ ‘must run,’ and ‘please help.’”

“Got it!”

Because Friede couldn’t howl herself, she had a hard time interpreting them—even though her ears could pick up on the noises themselves. Joshua was much better at it.

Friede dropped down to the floor again, and took her shirt off. It had a magic circle embroidered on the inside that dampened her vortex powers. Gomoviroa had made it so it was quite powerful. With the dampener off, Friede could use the full extent of her powers.

Surprised, Joshua came to a halt and asked, “Wait, Friede, what are you doing?!”

“I’m gonna suck in all the mana along our path!” Friede began concentrating on the circulation of mana around her, and stuck her fist out. “Uryaaaaaah!”

It was as if she’d fired an invisible cannonball from her hands. Massive holes formed in the walls in front of her, causing them to collapse.

“What in the world?!” the grimalkin shouted, dancing out of the way of the rushing sand.

“Are those allies?!” someone exclaimed.

Another asked, “Did Veight come to help?!”

Sorry it’s me, not my dad. Friede was once again reminded of how everyone expected Veight to come to their rescue, not her. But she nevertheless held her head high and shouted, “It’s me, the Black Werewolf Princess, Friede! I may not be my dad, but I’ve come to help!”

“Wait, Friede?! Seriously?!”

“What the heck’s the boss’s daughter doing here?!”

“Who cares, let’s just get out of here! We can’t beat that thing!”

After a few seconds, Friede saw a disheveled, wounded Kite run over, with Jerrick and his squad following close behind.

“It really is you, Friede!”

“No way! Aren’t you supposed to be in Wa?!”

I forgot no one in Meraldia really knows I’m here... Of course, now wasn’t the time to explain.

“This way, everyone! There’s a Heavenwatcher from Wa who can lead us out!”

“I don’t really get what’s going on but thanks a lot!”

Jerrick’s squad were all transformed, with Blast Rifles in their hands. All of their rifles appeared to be out of mana. They’d clearly been in a tough fight. Like Kite, the werewolves were pretty banged up.

Kite turned to Friede and shouted, “You get out of here too! In fact, you’re the one who *definitely* needs to get out of here!”

“Sorry, Professor, but I can’t do that!” While Kite was technically a high-ranking member of the demon army, he was also Friede’s teacher. But she still couldn’t do as he asked. “If I leave, Yuhette and Iori will be in danger! Oh, Iori’s a friend I made in Wa!”

“Gods, you really do take after your dad, always putting yourself in harm’s way! Look, just get out of here before—” Jerrick picked Kite up and started

running, so Kite didn't even get a chance to finish his sentence.

Friede turned back to Joshua and said, "I'm gonna do what I can, but if I get defeated, carry me and run, okay?"

"That's assuming I'm even still alive by the time you get defeated..." Joshua muttered, cracking his neck and his knuckles. "You really are just like Veight, you know that? Don't worry, I'll protect you. After all, I came here because I wanted to be more like him too."

"Just how popular is my dad..." Friede said in a disgruntled voice.

Looking up, she saw a man appear from the cloud of dust that had formed when she'd collapsed half a dozen walls in a row. *He's the same guy from before!* As the man passed through the rubble of the walls, they reformed behind him. Friede could see the flow of mana going from him into the sand.

The man came to a halt a few feet away from Friede. Like before, this man didn't smell like a human. But this one wasn't even hiding his animosity.

"So you mean to get in my way," he said simply.

"Yep."

Friede leapt forward and drove a strengthening magic-enhanced fist into his stomach. She'd hardened her skin and bones, giving her fist enough strength to shatter a boulder. But the moment her fist made contact, she felt a sharp pain, and she pulled her hand back.

"Ow!" Looking down, she saw that the part of her knuckle that had hit the fake Ason was inflamed.

"What's wrong, Friede?! Is he super hard or something?!"

Friede turned back and shook her head. "No, he's as soft as any human! But he turned my strengthening magic back on me!"

"He can do that?!"

"I used strengthening magic to harden my fists, but he reversed it to make them super soft! Ngh! Just touching that hand hurts now!" Friede canceled the spell, removing the reversing effects.

Expressionless, the fake Ason stood there, and asked, “Will you move?”

“No!”

But for all her defiance, Friede wasn't sure how to fight this guy. *Professor Kite said Blast Rifles didn't work on him. And if I use strengthening magic, he'll just turn it back on me. He's using some kind of magic I don't know anything about. Dad might know something since he's a master of strengthening magic, but I've only been learning for a few years. I guess I'll have to fight him with just my base abilities... But if we have to rely on brute strength, Joshua's stronger than me.* Indeed, just as she was thinking that, Joshua charged forward and aimed a flurry of kicks at the fake Ason.

“Take this!” His technique was superb, and he mixed in high kicks, low kicks, roundhouse kicks, and jump kicks to target different vital spots. But the fake Ason didn't budge at all under the flurry of blows.

“Pathetic,” he said, using some spell Friede didn't recognize to cause Joshua to sink into the sand until only his head was sticking out.

“Whoa!” Joshua exclaimed.

“Joshua?!” Friede hurriedly pulled him out, but that caused her to start sinking instead.

“Eek!” Friede quickly used magic to make herself as light as a kitten, but her ankles kept sinking despite her lighter weight.

“Joshua, run!” Using the same technique her dad once had, Friede threw Joshua to safety, knowing that it would make her sink even further in.

“Yaaah!” When she was knee-deep into the sand, she pushed against it with her palms, using the recoil to pull herself out. She then jumped into the air and fired her pistol at her enemy.

“Foolish.”

The fake Ason took no damage at all from the bullet, but Friede hadn't been trying to attack him in the first place. Since she was lighter now, the recoil of the blast sent her flying backwards. The sand she landed on was solid, unlike the quicksand near the fake Ason. She leapt backwards once again, not giving

the man any time to transform this sand as well.

“See ya!”

“Hmph! Trying to escape?!”

Friede ignored him and started running. But before long, the sand underneath her feet began to suck her in again.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

If she waited for even a second, she’d end up too deep to get out, so she switched back to leaping. After a few more bounds, she met back up with the grimalkin.

“Boss, isn’t this getting dicey?!”

“Yeah, this isn’t good!”

The group caught up with Joshua, Kite, and the others before long, then they all started running together.

“Where do we go?!”

“We have to get out of this maze!” Yuhette, who was once again being carried by Joshua, shouted. But Friede shook her head.

“We probably can’t get out of here, can we, Professor?!” she said, turning to him.

“Yeah, there’s a magical barrier surrounding the walls. We had trouble getting in at first. The magic used to make the barrier isn’t anything I’ve seen in Meraldia, or even in records of the Old Dynasty. It’s a weird hodgepodge of stuff.”

Shirin calmly analyzed the situation and said, “In that case, we need to find somewhere to hide. The enemy will probably be waiting for us at the entrance.”

“Agreed,” Friede replied.

Iori turned to her and said, “In that case, I know just the place.”

Everyone crowded together in the darkness.

“It’s kinda cramped in here...” Jerrick grumbled.

“Well, this is the best I can do. I only know a little illusion magic because Lacy taught me. Epoch magic is my specialty,” Kite replied dryly.

The two were good friends, so there wasn’t any real animosity in their voices. Right now, the party was hiding in one of the maze’s dead ends. Kite had put up an illusory wall in front of them to mask their location.

“It might be cramped, but this is definitely a good hiding place. The flow of mana here is pretty active. If you think of mana like one big river, this place is like the bottom of a waterfall. There are so many different localized currents here that epoch magic wouldn’t do you any good in seeking someone out.” Kite turned to lori and asked, “But how did you know about this place? This is your first time here too, right? Miss, umm...lori, was it?”

“Yes. But the layout of this maze is identical to that of Wa’s capital,” lori explained. “Friede had said the general flow of traffic in the capital serves as the mana source for the giant magic circle that the streets form. That reminded me of how there’s a place called the Witch’s Crossroads in the city. Evening is known as the ‘witching hour’ in Wa, and it’s said that strange things happen at the Witch’s Crossroads during that time.”

“I see, and this spot corresponds to the Witch’s Crossroads in the city? When the time goes from afternoon to evening, the flow of people shifts, which is probably what causes those strange phenomena. Similar oddities happen with complex magic circles that require flow shifts.”

Kite nodded, then sighed to himself.

“We were supposed to meet up with Veight’s investigation team...but our transmitters started acting up, and we got lost. When we found this place, we thought we might as well explore, but we had trouble getting in. Then we found a hole in the walls. But once we entered, that crazy man showed up and attacked us. If we hadn’t run into you guys, we’d be dead by now.”

“Wait, a hole in the wall?” Friede fell silent. *Was it my fault they were able to get in?* Before she could ask though, Fahn piped up.

“Honestly, the place gave us the creeps. We wanted to leave as soon as we

got in, but there was an army of giant sandworms outside. Kite's epoch magic wasn't working right, so we couldn't slip past them either. Did you guys come from the east, Friede?"

"Yeah, we walked here from Wa."

"But why?" Fahn asked, and Friede explained the dance and how they'd worked out the puzzle that led them here.

After hearing her explanation, Kite nodded and said, "That man who called himself Ason had an equal amount of mana flowing through every part of his body. He's clearly a being made of magic. I suspect he met the real Ason at some point and copied his appearance and speech mannerisms. Though, I can't imagine the real Ason was anything like that."

"But why, Professor?" Friede asked, and Kite scratched his head.

"I don't have enough information to make a real hypothesis, but I think it might have something to do with Ason's Legendary Treasure. This place might even be the artificial intelligence of the relic itself." Kite didn't seem too confident in his theory, but he added, "After Ason left with his treasure, he might have tried creating a structure similar to Wa's capital here. This entire sand maze is one big mana-gathering device. And it looks like he's trying to jump-start the spell by walking around it in the right way to create a big enough flow of mana by himself."

Thinking back to what she'd learned during her lectures, Friede tried to digest everything Kite had told her.

"Umm...that treasure is a tool to make Valkaan, right? But I guess the treasure itself is gone, so this fake Ason is trying to use the sand maze to do the same thing?"

"Most likely. People in Wa use a special form of magic known as Onmyoudou that doesn't exist anywhere else. From what I understand, it was something that was taught to the people of Wa by Ason. So whatever this magical being is, it either absorbed Ason's memories, or made some kind of deal with him to learn his techniques." Kite folded his arms and sighed. "Either way, we need to get out of here and meet up with Veight. At this rate, Wa or Meraldia's scouting teams might find this place and get trapped as well. We need to do something

—fast.”

“Yeah, the three musketeers already went back to report about what we found...” They didn’t know about the fake Ason, so any investigation team Wa sent would be blindly heading into danger.

Monza perked up and said, “There’s another reason we’ve gotta hurry. We need to eat to keep our strength up, and we eat ten times more than humans. If we stay here too long, we’ll be running on fumes.”

Frowning, Jerrick added, “We left all of our food and water outside. Though, I guess that turned out to be the right choice, since we didn’t have to abandon our luggage when running from that guy.”

Friede had abandoned her water bottle when running to Kite’s aid. Shirin and the others had similarly dropped their luggage too.

In a light tone, Jerrick said, “We do have about half a day’s worth of food and water in our personal packs, but I still don’t think we should stay here too long.”

“I know, but that fake Ason is really strong... On top of that, he has access to all the mana stored in this maze. He can do pretty much anything here,” Kite replied.

In a worried voice, Yuhette asked, “Professor, could the fake Ason create a Valkaan right now?”

“No, he doesn’t have quite enough mana for that. This maze is much smaller than Wa’s capital, and going by the square root law, a grain of sand can probably only hold up to .0014 kites of mana... At best, he’s got about a few thousand to maybe 10,000 kites of mana here. That’s not nearly enough to make a Valkaan.”

Friede was impressed by how quickly he’d done that mental math.

“Still, we can’t afford to leave this place alone. Given time, this fake Ason definitely could make a Valkaan. But we’ll need Veight and the Demon Empress’s help if we want to take down something this big.”

“Speaking of which, where is my dad right now anyway?” Friede asked.

“I don’t know, since I wasn’t able to meet up with him. We went straight

north from the coast when we landed, and ended up here. But he should be close —my epoch magic was able to figure out that much before it went haywire.”

“How come you weren’t able to meet up with him if you got that close?”

Kite scratched his head awkwardly and replied, “Er... So, we picked up Veight’s communication from our transceivers, and that helped us triangulate what direction he was in and how far. But then we started getting a lot of mana interference that started causing a lot of echoes. My guess is the mana veins underground were acting as amplifiers that echoed things back and forth, but that also made it hard to gauge proper distance.”

“That sounds fascinating.”

Kite nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’d love to research the phenomenon once we get out of here...but now’s not the time for that discussion. We must escape first.”

“Can’t you just call dad with that transceiver, and tell him to come over here?”

“No, it hasn’t been working right at all since we entered the maze. The mana is so thick here it can’t function.”

“I see... That’s pretty interesting!”

“Yeah, but...I really should be thinking about how to get in touch with Veight rather than giving you lectures on magic.”

Everyone spoke of Veight as though he could do anything. He had, of course, defeated a Valkaan in single combat, and was an exemplary mage and an undefeated general, so it wasn’t exactly unwarranted.

“You think dad will be able to beat that fake Ason?” Friede asked, and Kite scratched his head again.

“Probably. But even Veight might have trouble with this guy. If Fake Ason uses all of his stockpiled mana to fight, Veight’s gonna be in trouble.”

A little worried now, Friede asked, “But Granny Movi can definitely beat him, right?”

“Well, the Demon Empress probably wouldn’t have any problem at all, but unfortunately, she went back to Meraldia for a bit the same time I landed. She can’t afford to leave for too long, since she is the symbolic head of the nation.”

“Oh...”

If Veight came here blind to the threat, he would struggle to beat the fake Ason. In fact, he might even lose. *I think dad only has around 1,500 kites of mana right now.* Friede knew that he also had the same vortex power she and Gomoviroa possessed. Veight could theoretically absorb and stockpile as much mana as he wanted. *But if he goes up against the fake Ason right now, he’ll only have 1,500 kites against Fake Ason’s potentially 10,000.* Friede was starting to feel uneasy. She couldn’t imagine anything actually beating her father, and she didn’t want to. Even she felt a measure of security from knowing her dad was invincible.

Shirin seemed to share Friede’s unease, and he asked, “What should we do, Friede? Sitting here waiting to get rescued seems like a bad plan.”

Yuhette and Iori nodded in agreement.

“We should act while we have the chance.”

“Agreed. If you have a plan, Friede, I will gladly give my life to protect yours.”

Fahn frowned and said, “Hey, don’t just go deciding things by yourselves, kiddos. But I guess the grown-ups probably feel the same way. Isn’t that right, Kite?”

“Yeah. Right now we have the strength to fight, but in a few days, we’ll be dying of hunger and thirst. Even if Veight does show up then, we’ll just make things harder for him since he’ll have to rescue us instead of focusing on the fight.” Frowning, Kite added, “Unfortunately, we’re up against a pretty tough opponent. It’s up to us mages to figure out a way to outsmart him. Friede, help me come up with a plan.”

“Roger!” Friede replied with a firm nod.

“Let’s go over what we know first,” Kite said, sounding like he was about to start giving a lecture.

Friede felt like she really was back in class as she nodded. *We've gotta do something, or dad might be in trouble.*

“Right now, we’re hiding in the middle of enemy territory. While that severely limits our retreat options, this is also a golden opportunity to strike at our foe’s weak point.” Kite sounded surprisingly calm considering the dire straits they were in.

That reminds me, Professor Kite experienced something similar during the whole Draulight’s Legacy incident, didn’t he? I bet he took charge just like this back then too. He’s so cool! Friede of course hadn’t been born yet, but she’d read the accounts in school.

Unaware of Friede’s thoughts, Kite continued his lecture.

“Thanks to Miss Iori’s explanation, we know there are places in this maze where strange phenomena can occur. For simplicity’s sake, we’ll refer to them as ‘witching hour phenomena.’ We know they happen at certain points of any sufficiently complex mana circle when the flow of mana shifts.”

Kite scratched his head awkwardly.

“I originally thought the strange occurrences the people of Wa talked about were just them seeing things in the dim twilight, but...” He cleared his throat. “Well, putting my mistakes aside, the point is—we might be able to make use of this witching hour. However, unlike in Wa’s capital, there’s only a single person responsible for the flow of mana in this maze.”

“Wait, so has he been circling this place alone for centuries?” Friede asked with a frown. She was reminded of the undead that had been found in Zaria’s catacombs a decade or so back. *Come to think of it, dad’s the one that got rid of those too, isn’t he?* It seemed to Friede as though Veight had been part of every single historical event for the past fifteen years.

Kite nodded and answered, “He may be alone, but he seems to possess several hundred kites of mana, so he can create a significant flow all by himself. While he might not have been able to gather enough mana to create a Valkaan over the last thousand years, he’s still a force to be reckoned with. However, the fact that he stored so much mana in the maze leads me to believe he himself can’t hold too much.”

“So he’s stored all of his excess mana in these walls?” Shirin asked. He wasn’t a mage himself, so he was struggling to keep up.

Friede cast her gaze over the group, trying to think of a good plan. *I feel like there’s something we should be able to do here, but what? What’s the right call?*

In a bitter voice, Kite said, “Gah! I can’t think of anything useful. We might really just have to rely on Veight yet again. I feel like I haven’t grown as a person at all.”

Fahn gave Kite a reassuring smile and said, “Now, now, no need to get depressed. It’s kind of impossible to match up to Veight, so don’t try to compare yourself to him.”

However, Kite shook his head. “No, if I accept that logic, then I’ll never be someone who can stand next to him as an equal. For once, I want to do something helpful.”

Friede didn’t know what past event Kite was referring to, but she could feel the determination in his voice. *What happened with him and dad before I was born?* Back when Meraldia had been a federation instead of a commonwealth, Kite had worked for the Senate. Now he was Meraldia’s Grand Magus, and the leader of the nation’s mages. He also worked at Meraldia’s university as a professor, and Friede respected him a great deal. She honestly couldn’t understand why he was debasing himself so much.

Then again, I guess even dad goes on about how he wished he had half of Friedensrichter’s knowledge and stuff... Maybe that’s just how all adults are. Friede filed away that slightly misguided heuristic away in her head. *I guess I need to prove I can be independent—that I don’t need dad to bail me out of every situation too.* For both the teacher she respected so much and for herself, Friede desperately tried to come up with a plan that didn’t involve waiting for Veight to show up.

“Professor!”

“Oh, did you think of something, Friede?”

“I’m pretty sure even if we don’t contact dad, he’s gonna come here

eventually.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

Both of them had absolute trust in Veight. But that wasn’t why Friede had brought that up.

“So, I think we should at least make sure that when he does, he’ll be able to win easily.”

“Well, he certainly wouldn’t have a chance in a direct battle of pure magical might... But seeing as he was able to beat a Hero in single combat, he probably has some tricks up his sleeve.”

Friede looked Kite in the eye and asked, “Just what kind of person do you think dad is, Professor?”

Kite smiled.



“An invincible legend,” he said.

“Ehehe.” It was funny seeing Kite praise Veight so much.

Folding his arms, Kite asserted, “This fake Ason doesn’t have nearly as much mana as a Hero, but he’s still got magnitudes more than Veight. Moreover, he can weaponize this entire maze. If he hits Veight with everything he’s got the moment Veight walks in, he might actually not survive...” After thinking about the problem for a while, Kite grinned. “Maybe I should take a leaf out of Veight’s book and do something *reckless*.”

“I’m probably the wrong person to say this, but you really shouldn’t try and emulate dad.”

Kite was a fragile human, and he couldn’t even use destruction magic to fight with. If he tried to pull any of the same stunts Veight did, he’d die.

However, Kite just smiled and said, “Don’t worry. For an epoch mage, being reckless doesn’t mean throwing yourself headfirst at your enemy. I don’t plan on moving a single step from here. After all, fake Ason could kill me in seconds if he found me.”

“So then what are you going to do?”

In a cheerful tone, Kite replied, “Let me show you. Actually, I need your help anyway, so follow me.”

“Roger!” said Friede. *I don’t know what he has in mind, but it sounds fun.*

I knew something was wrong for sure once Mao’s caravan arrived.

“So, Kite and the others left port before you did?” I asked, and one of Mao’s subordinates nodded.

“Yes. We needed to repair the ship and inspect our cargo, so Master Kite departed a day ahead of us. He had Master Fahn, Master Jerrick, and Master Monza with him.”

“Fahn’s squad has the Garney brothers in it, so I can’t imagine they got done in by a sandworm...” The only other threats in the desert were bands of dragonkin bandits, but the sandscales had formed an alliance with us, so they shouldn’t have attacked Kite.

In a worried voice, Mao's subordinate asked, "Did they get lost?"

"I doubt it. Kite's far too skilled with epoch magic to lose his bearings. Likely some unforeseen accident happened instead."

If we were dealing with an unknown situation, I needed to move fast. I grabbed my Blast Rifle and got to my feet, handing Mao's man the check for the goods.

"Have your caravan depart for Meraldia at once, and let the Demon Empress know what's happened. I'll give you some of my werewolves and a few of the sandscales to serve as bodyguards. Try looking for Kite on the way back too, just in case. I'll make sure Mao pays you for your services."

"As you wish, my lord."

"Oh, but if there are any sick people in your party, don't force them to make the journey with you. They can rest here at our camp." I felt bad about piling so much extra work on these guys. It reminded me of the times I was forced to do overtime because of my bosses' slip-ups. *No time for reminiscing now.*

Mao's subordinate took the check, and asked in a hopeful voice, "Will you be returning with us as well, Lord Veight?"

"No, I'm afraid I'll be using another method to look for Kite." I couldn't go into details since what I was using was confidential military technology. Fortunately, the people who worked for Mao knew all about keeping secrets, so no one pressed me for an explanation.

"Very well. We shall depart at once then."

"Thanks. And, uh, sorry about this."

Adding more sudden work puts a big burden on people. I really did feel bad about asking so much of them.

Once Mao's caravan had departed, I went to my tent and grabbed my transceiver.

"I knew it, he's out of range..."

The transceiver only worked for up to a few kilometers. Their range could be

extended by building transmission hubs, similar to building cell towers back on earth, but that wasn't really feasible in the middle of the desert. However, Kite was so skilled at epoch magic that he could pick up on transmissions far outside the effective range. Knowing him, he'd picked up on my transceiver's position from the moment he'd left the port. In which case, he'd probably set a direct route to my position. But somewhere along the way, they must have gotten stranded, or they would have reached here by now.

Kite would have kept his transceiver on at all times, and close to his person. I, too, had been sending constant messages the past day for him to get. However, I still hadn't gotten a single reply from him. I had no way of pinpointing the location of Kite's transceiver from my end. We were both mages, but my specialty lay in strengthening magic.

"What could have happened...?" Panicking wouldn't help matters, so I decided to go to a specialist.

"Hey, Ryucco."

"Yeah?" I handed the transceiver to Ryucco, who was lounging around in my tent.

"Is there any situation where you might be able to pick up a message with the transceiver, but not pinpoint the location it originated from?"

"Nope. With the way mana travels, that's just impossible. It'd be the same as mistaking what direction a voice is coming from when it's—wait a second."

Ryucco sat straight up, and I asked, "With sound, if there are echoes, it gets hard to tell where the voice is coming from. Can something like that happen with mana too?"

"Yeah...that's definitely possible, Veight." Ryucco's expression grew serious, and he started thumping my bed repeatedly with his foot. "Gods blast it, I totally forgot. There are veins of super-dense mana running through the ground in this desert. Those could definitely screw with a transceiver."

I drew closer to Ryucco and said, "If you got echoes from those mana veins and followed them, you'd keep going north right past our position, wouldn't you?"

“Yep. If you look at the topography, that’s where you’d end up—theoretically. Also, don’t put your face so close to mine.”

“Ah, sorry.” I sat back down in my chair, but then I immediately got to my feet. “I’m going north.”

“Are you kidding me?!”

Naturally, my werewolves were vehemently opposed to my plan.

“It’s too dangerous to go any further north, boss!”

“We still don’t know where the bigger sandworms are hiding! If you accidentally get caught by one...”

Sorry, but I’m going no matter what you say.

“I’m the only one who can make himself light enough to walk over sandworm traps without springing them. Don’t worry, I’ll take a few grimalkin with me as messengers. The larger sandworms can’t pick up on the vibrations of their walking either.”

“That’s not nearly enough backup!”

“The Demon Lord’s vice-commander can’t just go into uncharted, dangerous territory without guards!”

“Lady Airia’s going to give you an earful if she finds out!”

Yeah, she probably will. But me and the grimalkin, we could scout the area safely. And I was confident I could take down any of the smaller sandworms alone. Plus, the grimalkin wouldn’t need too much food or water, so we wouldn’t have to carry much in the way of supplies.

Of course, these reasonable, logical arguments wouldn’t sway my werewolves, so instead I said in a joking tone, “Don’t worry, uncharted territory automatically becomes charted once I’m there.”

“That’s... I could see that being possible, yeah.”

No, that’s a joke. You’re supposed to laugh. The younger werewolves who hadn’t been with me for as long exchanged glances with the mages the

Commonwealth Council had sent to help me out. They were all promising youngsters who'd come to get some field experience.

The lot of them started whispering furiously to each other.

"It's true that Lord Veight can probably handle anything he runs into."

"Sure, but it's our responsibility to make sure he doesn't do anything reckless..."

"Yeah, but even if we try to stop him, he'll go anyway."

"He's the demon army's invincible vice-commander, I'm sure he'll be fine no matter what happens."

Do they think I'm a god or something?

Clearing my throat, I said in my most dignified voice, "I know I have a bad habit of putting myself in danger, but I'm not good at dividing up responsibilities among others. Besides, I don't want to lose any of you. The demon army, and Meraldia as a whole, needs your skills."

If even one lowly soldier went missing, I would make sure to expend every effort to rescue them, and that would waste time I couldn't afford right now. It was important that the people at the top showed that they valued those who worked under them, or eventually their subordinates would come to resent them.

"There simply isn't much time. In a few days, the Demon Empress will be apprised of the situation, but I need to do what I can in the meantime. I just hope the grimalkin are okay with tagging along."

Just then, Ryucco came running up.

"Hold on, I'm coming too!"

"Thanks. Your skills will be a huge help."

With that, I headed north with Ryucco and a few grimalkin.

The region north of our base camp was completely uncharted territory. Due to the large size of the sandworms nested there, not even the sandscales that

inhabited the desert had stepped foot in that area.

“Veight, if those guys you’re looking for went this way, I’m pretty sure they got eaten by the sandworms,” one of the grimalkin who was accompanying me said.

If everyone who comes here dies, then how are you guys still alive? Smiling to myself, I replied casually, “Kite’s a master of epoch magic. He’d be able to tell where the sandworms dwell.”

“If he’s so good, how’d he get lost?”

“I’d like to know that myself.”

If Ryucco’s theory was correct, we’d run into Kite by following the veins of mana running underground. However, those same mana veins were what fed the large sandworms. The closer we got to the center of this mana anomaly, the more sandworms we’d encounter. *I hope Kite and the others are okay.*

In a comforting tone, Ryucco said, “Don’t worry, Veight. If Kite’s party had been attacked, we would have seen signs of it. Since there aren’t any survivors running back this way, or packs strewn about anywhere, I think they’re still alive.”

“Good point...”

I was still worried, but for now, all I could do was hope for their safety. We advanced carefully, in order to make sure we didn’t run into any sandworms either. The grimalkin could walk nimbly even on the loosest sand, and I’d made myself almost as light as air to practically float above it. Limiting the number of people I’d brought with me was the right choice. Werewolves could move pretty fast when transformed, but in sand this loose, they’d find themselves hampered by their own weight—and would almost certainly attract the attention of sandworms. Meanwhile, grimalkin and lagomorphs were too light to trigger the sandworms’ senses. In this situation, they actually had more utility than a werewolf.

Strength really does come in different forms. As I was thinking that, one of the grimalkin I’d sent out ahead to scout came running back in a panic.

“Veight! There’s something huge beyond that sand dune! It’s like a village

made of sand!”

“All right, from here on out I’ll go alone. I want half of the grimalkin to go back and report what you’ve seen. The rest stay here to watch our luggage. This place is crawling with sandworms so don’t move things around too much. Even if you’re light, they might react to the vibrations of our luggage shifting.”

“I’m scared...” one grimalkin said.

“If anything happens, ditch the supplies and run.”

I made my way up the sand dune alone. Since I couldn’t use epoch magic, I had no way of knowing if I was going straight over a sandworm nest or not. Praying that my vibrations were light enough to escape notice, I hurried forward. Eventually, I spotted the walls made of sand that the grimalkin had talked about. This structure was clearly man-made and built with magic. *But why make something like that here?*

“Hm?”

As I got closer, I saw a jumble of packs and boxes near the castle’s main entrance. The crates all had the seal of the Meraldian Commonwealth on them—meaning this luggage likely belonged to Kite’s group. Judging by how much sand was covering them, this stuff had been sitting out here for half a day, or a day at most.

I didn’t see Kite anywhere, but I also didn’t smell any blood—or any corpses or weapons for that matter. Chances were, his group was inside. The walls of sand were quite hard, and it didn’t look like there was any conventional door you could open to get in. Moreover, the walls were high enough that a werewolf couldn’t jump straight to the top. The walls were smooth as concrete too, so it wouldn’t be easy to climb them. *How did you guys get in?*

“Hmm...”

I was operating alone here, so I needed to be cautious. There was clearly some trick to getting inside, but I didn’t want to trigger any traps and go from rescuer to rescuee. That said, I needed to hurry. Even if Kite and the others were alive right now, they wouldn’t be able to survive for more than a few days without their supplies.

“All right...”

It'd be lacking in finesse, but using my trump card here seemed like the most surefire way to get in safely. When Master had achieved true immortality, I'd been present for the ritual. As a result, I'd inherited a small fraction of her vortex powers. Like her, I had the ability to endlessly absorb mana. In theory, all magic needed mana to function, so my vortex power should be able to invalidate any and all magic.

I tapped the wall with my fist, and a section of it crumbled away; the mana holding the sand together flowed into my body.

“Why is it that I always end up destroying things instead of building them...” I did feel bad for ruining whoever's project this was, but this was an emergency situation.

Stepping through the hole I'd created, I entered this mysterious castle.

The floor of the cramped dead end Friede and the others were hiding in was now littered with pages containing numerous calculations.

“This is the last sheet, guys,” Jerrick said, handing over the final piece of paper to Kite. He snatched it out of Jerrick's hand and started scribbling furiously.

“It's fine, my calculations are done. I'm just recording the final results now. Don't bother me. Also, get me some water.”

Kite was too focused on what he was doing to give more than a curt reply to anything anyone said to him.

“Heh, he always gets like this when he's concentrating. I don't know how Lacy puts up with him,” Monza said as she handed Kite a canteen. But he pushed it away from her.

“On second thought, never mind. Monza, you stand there. Mind you, Lacy's my *wife*.”

“Uh-huh.” Sighing, Monza turned back to Friede. “You know, parchment paper is really expensive.”

“Yeah. But there's nothing else for us to write on. The floor's too hard.”

Friede bent down and picked up someone's shirt that Kite had also

requisitioned as paper. The writing on it was so small and cramped that no one else could even decipher it.

“Are those differential equations...?” Friede muttered.

“They do look like your standard differentials, but I have no idea what he’s trying to calculate with them,” Yuhette answered.

“He’s probably trying to calculate the exact flow of mana throughout this maze. Since he can’t go around measuring it, he’s trying to approximate it using the measurements he can take from right here... I think, anyway,” Friede explained.

“How will knowing that help him?”

“Hmm...I don’t really know myself.” Friede wasn’t enough of a scholar yet.

Just then, Kite dropped his last sheet of paper onto the floor and exclaimed, “Perfect!”

“Whoa, don’t scare me like that!” Friede said, surprised.

“I’ve got it!” Kite explained with a grin. “I can do this. The fake Ason’s movement pattern and the specifics of this magic circle mean it’s possible!”

“What’s possible?” Shirin asked in a timid voice, and Kite pointed to the map of the city Iori had given him.

“We can get out of here without relying on Veight! After the fake Ason passes this point here, we just have to break that wall over there! That’ll cut off the circle’s loop, and all the mana in this castle will be expelled in one big rush!”

Iori stared intently at the map. “In the capital, that would be about where the Chrysanthemum Court’s hall is. What you’re trying to do is connect Tsukumo Lane and Shisuji Street directly by building a path straight through, right?”

Kite tossed his pen aside and nodded. “Exactly. If Wa’s capital is built the same way, that means those two streets are separated by the four walls that protect the Chrysanthemum Court’s hall. We just need to open a hole through them.”

“You make it sound easy, but that’s pretty far from here,” Iori said in a worried voice.

Friede grinned. “We’ll be going after the fake Ason’s passed through there, so it should be fine. Professor, the fake Ason takes the same route every time, right?”

“Yep. It might look like he’s moving around at random, but there’s a rigid pattern to his movements. The fake Ason himself is an important part of this magic circle. Because he himself is creating the flow that makes it run, he can’t double back ever.”

I feel kinda bad for him now... Friede thought, but she didn’t let that get in the way of what she needed to do.

“Okay then, I’ll be the one to go.”

“Sounds good. But wait until it’s evening. That’s when it’ll be safe for...” Kite trailed off, his face scrunching up. “Hm?”

Kite made a few hand motions, casting several spells at once.

“I can sense a new source of mana near the southern side. Hang on, something just smashed a hole through one of the walls there.”

Excited, Monza asked, “Wait, so can we just leave through there?”

“No, a hole that small will close instantly. The problem is that a hole was made in the first place. I think that means Veight’s here.”

Surprised, Friede shouted, “That’s way too fast!”

Fahn shrugged her shoulders in response. “Yeah, that’s Veight for you. When someone’s in danger, he’ll just charge off alone to save them.”

“Isn’t that something a general’s *not* supposed to do?” Friede asked.

“We’ve been telling him that for decades, but he won’t listen.” Fahn sighed.

If Veight was here, Kite knew he wouldn’t rest until he’d found everyone. However, Veight probably didn’t know his daughter was here as well. And more importantly, he knew absolutely nothing about the fake Ason.

“We have to go—now!” Friede yelled.

“Hold on, it’s too dangerous right now,” Kite replied.

“But dad’s in even more danger, Professor!” Friede got to her feet and took

the map from him. “I’m going to go save him!”

Kite hurriedly grabbed Friede’s sleeve. “Wait! I’m telling you, it’s too dangerous! If you go now, the fake Ason will find you!”

“But what if dad loses to him?! Professor, I’m going with plan B!”

“You can’t just decide that on your own—hey, wait!” Friede dashed off before Kite could stop her. As she left, she could hear Kite shouting, “Ah, jeez, you really do take after your father, you know that! Hey, werewolves, we’re gonna make a diversion! We need to support that reckless father-daughter duo, or they’ll get themselves killed!”

Sorry, Professor. Friede leapt over the walls, making a beeline for the spot Kite had marked. Her half-werewolf strength let her jump over the lower inner walls of the maze, and she kicked up clouds of dust as she bounded forward. *Where’s the fake Ason? Has he not noticed me yet?* Just as she thought that, something shot out of the walls on both sides to attack her.

“Whoa?!” Friede reflexively dodged out of the way, then turned to see who her assailants were.

“A nue?! Wait, no...”

The creatures attacking Friede were the sort of chimeras that people in Wa called nue. But they had no smell, and Friede quickly realized they must be made of sand. That made sense, considering they’d come out of the walls. Fake or not though, there were enough of them to be quite a threat.

Sand is just small grains of rock. And compacted sand is just as dense as rock, meaning these guys should be heavier than actual living beings! I think! If Friede’s analysis was correct, they’d move slowly and have difficulty changing direction. Her best bet was to bait out an attack, then slip past them.

“Here we go! Hyaaah?!”

One of the sand nue had swiped at her, its aim precise. They were still slow, but they packed a lot of power. One clean hit would take Friede out of commission. As Friede advanced, more and more nue popped out of the walls to stop her.

“Your things are so annoying! But I guess if you’re throwing this much at me, it proves you really don’t want me to go any further! Which means Professor Kite’s calculations are spot-on!”

Trusting in Kite’s analysis, Friede rushed forward. Since she just dashed past the nue instead of eliminating them, there was now a veritable army following her. But they were clearly being ordered not to damage the walls, as their attacks were quite restrained. Plus, Friede was nimble enough to run along the tops of the walls, which was something the heavy nue couldn’t do.

“All right, this is working.”

Nue were popping up frequently enough that Friede couldn’t afford to stop. But as long as she kept moving, she was confident she’d make it without getting hit. Before long, Friede reached her destination.

“That’s the place, isn’t it?”

Friede couldn’t afford to take out the map to check, but she did remember how the streets around the Chrysanthemum Court’s hall had looked back in the capital. And the layout of the passages matched those streets perfectly. Friede also had the power of vortex, so she wouldn’t have any trouble destroying the four walls either. All she needed to do was absorb the mana that held them together.

I’ve got this! But just as Friede celebrated her victory, a figure appeared before her.

“Fake Ason?!”

“I will not allow it,” he said in an emotionless voice, raising one hand towards Friede.

I warily made my way through what appeared to be a maze made of sand. There was nothing but walls inside, with no other landmarks or objects.

“The heck is this place?” Some of the walls were damaged, and the corpses of what looked like stereotypical chimeras in my old world littered the floor. They closely resembled the nue I’d fought a decade ago. However, these chimeras didn’t look like naturally existing creatures that had morphed due to magic. Rather, they were a strange hodgepodge that had been forcibly linked together

with sand.

“Are they...artificial life forms made by combining the silicon in sand, and the carbon and hydrogen in the air?”

There were over a dozen nue corpses that I could see, and they were all degrading the way magically constructed creatures did after death.

“Hm?”

I could hear the sound of Blast Rifles in the distance. I also picked up on the faint smell of werewolves, and saw intermittent flashes of light. *Looks like Kite and the others are fighting. Close by, even.*

Hefting my rifle, I took as direct a route as I could towards the commotion. The crossroads for this maze came at regular intervals, and it almost felt like I was running down a chessboard—the walls being squares, and the edges the passages. It reminded me of the layout of Wa’s capital. There were faintly flickering magic circles on the hardened sand flagstone floors. From what I could tell, this maze was created using the same technique Ason had taught the people of Wa to make their capital one big magic circle.

But if this had something to do with Ason, the chronology didn’t line up. In Ason’s time, this had been an empty desert.

“Over there!” exclaimed a voice.

The fighting seemed to be happening just one street away. As I rounded the corner, I saw Jerrick in his human form, down on one knee. Bloody bandages covered half his body. Fahn was next to him, also in human form. Both of them were too injured to maintain werewolf form. But they were still burning with fighting spirit, firing their Blast Rifles as fast as they could. The rest of my werewolves were fighting as well among the next few corridors. I could see the flashes coming from their rifles every few seconds. Kite seemed to be barking out orders to everyone.

“Kite!” I shouted, and everyone turned to face me.

Kite, Jerrick, Monza, and Fahn all exclaimed at once.

“Veight!”

“Boss!”

“You’re laaaate!”

“You’re too early!”

Which is it, you two? The fake nue took a few swipes at me, so I cast strengthening magic on all of them.

“Crumble,” I said simply, making them heavier.

The spell to change someone’s weight was one of the simplest strengthening magic spells, and the very first one I’d learned. I’d had over twenty years to master it, and it was definitely the spell I was best at. Moreover, these creatures were easier to affect with magic, being made of magic themselves.

Their weight increased dramatically, and they dissipated, unable to stay together under the increased load. *Looks like whoever made them didn’t bother warding them against magic. Sloppy.*

“Holy shit!” the elder Garney brother shouted as he watched the nue fall apart, and I gave him a small wave.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of these guys.”

I mentally locked onto every nue I could see, then cast the same weight-increasing spell on all of them.

“Die, all of you.”

In an instant, the sand nue all crumbled. Crushed by their own weight, the magic spell that allowed them to move fell apart as well. They quite literally returned to dust. The beat-up werewolves began celebrating their victory.

“Hell yeah, we wooon!”

“You’re amazing, Veight!”

“What was that?! Was that magic you used?!”

Yep. A mage had made those nue, yet said person clearly had no idea how to fight a fellow mage.

“Did he really think this would be enough to eliminate intruders?” I asked.

“I mean...we would have all died if you hadn’t shown up,” Fahn said in an exasperated voice. But then her expression darkened, and she shouted, “Wait, forget about us, go help Friede!”

“What do you mean? Friede?” I asked, surprised. *Isn’t she supposed to be in Wa? Wait...*

Just then, Shirin came bounding forward. “Uncle!”

“Shirin?! Yuhette and Joshua too?!” There was another girl I didn’t recognize. *Is that Tokitaka’s daughter? What’s she doing here?* If the kids were all here, this really was an emergency situation.

“Shirin, explain what’s going on to me!”

Shirin gave me a formal demon army salute, then said, “Yes, sir! The enemy is a magically constructed being who claims to be Ason! We’re serving as a distraction so Friede can go to the center of the maze and destroy it!”

I laid a comforting hand on Shirin’s shoulder. “Got it, I’m going to her.”

Meanwhile, Friede had the fake Ason to contend with.

“Whoa?!”

Friede had been sprinting forward at full speed when he appeared, and she had to jump over him to dodge the sand snake he’d sent at her. *Is this the real fake Ason? Or a fake fake made out of sand?!* A real fake was a strange concept, but it made sense to Friede in her own head, which was what mattered. More importantly, Friede stood no chance against the real fake Ason, but she could potentially beat a fake fake Ason.

The real fake Ason is supposed to pass through here around now! I can’t risk fighting him! Friede landed atop the wall and immediately used her vortex to start sucking the mana out of it. With a deep rumble, the wall crumbled.

“Cough, cough! Perfect, on to the next one!” The fake Ason created another set of sand snakes to attack Friede, but she somersaulted away and dashed towards the next wall.

“Uryaaaaah!” Tackling it, she absorbed its mana as well, and the second wall fell. Sand cascaded down on her like a waterfall. “Yikes!”

She dodged to the side to avoid being crushed by the sand, and ran atop the undamaged part of the wall. Dodging yet more snakes—and occasionally even using them as stepping stones—she made her way to the third wall.

“That’s three!” She jumped onto the third wall and crushed it underfoot. *Just one left!* But the moment she thought that, something sent her flying.

“What the—” She hit the floor so hard it knocked the wind out of her lungs, and her vision blurred. But she couldn’t afford to pass out now. No one was around to rescue her.

“Ngh!” Grunting, she forced herself to her feet. She saw a snake bearing down on her and jumped away in the nick of time. Her head was still spinning from the blow, and the lack of oxygen. *That last attack didn’t come from the snake! What hit me?!*

“Fool,” the fake Ason said from behind Friede, and she instinctively pulled out her pistol and fired.

“Take that!” The bullet hit the fake Ason square in the head, and he crumbled away into dust. *So that was a fake fake?! That doesn’t make any sense!* A chill ran down her spine, and a second later another blow sent her flying.

“Gaaah!”

Friede managed to break her fall properly this time, but she rolled across the ground so much she couldn’t tell what direction she was facing anymore. However, there was something hard touching her back. *That’s probably the fourth wall, right? If I just break it...* Unfortunately, fake Ason wouldn’t give her the chance.

“Uryaaaah!”

Friede once again forced herself to her feet, and took stock of her surroundings. There was an entire group of fake Asons surrounding her now.

“No way...”

There were at least twenty of them, and they all looked completely identical. Friede had no way of telling which was the real fake Ason. She also didn’t have the means to fight all of them at once. Each of them summoned a snake from

each of their sleeves. Friede had no means of dodging forty snakes aimed at her. For a second, Friede debated whether to run or to stand her ground. If she ran, she'd end up leading the fake Ason straight to her comrades. But she didn't stand a chance in a fight.

"Phew..." Friede smiled, steeling herself. "Guess this is my only choice."

Ignoring the fake Asons, Friede focused on taking out the final wall. As she stuck her fist into it, sand tumbled over her. Almost immediately, the fake nue that had been trying to make their way to her fell lifeless to the ground, then dissolved into sand.

"Hrm?" All of the fake Asons staggered backwards, but they didn't crumble. It seemed they were made with a different spell than the nue.

As one, they said, "You whelp! How dare you destroy the ley lines!"

"I'm not a whelp, fake Ason!" Turning her back to the rain of sand, Friede raised her pistol and said, "I'm Friede. The Black Werewolf King Veight's daughter. Friede the Black Werewolf Princess!" In response, the fake Asons silently fired their snakes at her. There was a deluge of sand to her back, and a wall of sand snakes in front of her, leaving Friede nowhere to run.

Like hell I'm dying here! Friede knew it had been a risk to come alone, but that didn't mean she was just going to roll over and die now that the job was done. *I ran into danger so that I could save everyone, including myself! So I'm definitely gonna survive this and go back to everyone!* She used strengthening magic to raise her reflexes to the limit, then started dodging each snake with as little movement required as possible.

"You'll never hit me!" she shouted, shooting, kicking, and punching the snakes as she passed them.

Before long, she was covered in sand from all the snakes she'd destroyed. *I can't keep this up for long! I'm gonna have to break through soon!* Friede knew she couldn't beat all of the fake Asons in front of her, so her only choice was going through the sand waterfall behind her.

Strengthening her muscles and bones as much as possible, she dived into the sand. Sand was much denser than water, and Friede could feel the pressure as

it rained down on her. A normal human would have been buried in seconds. It was only thanks to her innate strength, as well as her magic, that she managed to cling to consciousness in the pitch-black deluge of sand.

As she forced her way through, she let out a breath and shouted, "I'm definitely going to survive this!"

Just then, something pulled Friede with abnormal strength. *Dammit, did he catch up to me?! No, wait, I recognize this touch. It's nostalgic...* The strength receded from Friede's limbs just as she was pulled through the last of the sand to the corridor on the other side. It looked like the sand waterfall itself had stopped too, and there were just a few streams leisurely flowing down the giant pile. Looking up, Friede saw Veight smiling down at her.

"Well, guess I know who you take after."

"...Dad?!" she exclaimed.

I guess Friede really does take after me. At least in the recklessness department. Relieved that I'd made it in time to rescue her, I turned my attention to the enemy before me.

All of the men were decently tall, and looked like they had Mongol ancestry in them. They were wearing a kimono that very closely resembled the informal clothing Japanese nobility used to wear during the Heian period. They also looked exactly like how the books described Ason.

Taking aim, I switched my rifle to fully automatic and let loose. Balls of light hit the fake Asons' heads and torsos, turning them into sand. They shot snakes made of sand at me, but I blasted those away as well. *This guy really didn't prepare at all for a mage battle, did he?* Only one of the fake Asons reacted differently to my bullets. This one actually managed to repel some of them.

"Huh?!"

I see, so you do have a few defensive options. And more importantly, you need to use them. Meaning, you wouldn't be able to take one of these bullets head-on. I hoped my assessment was correct. As I kept firing, I slowly lowered Friede to the ground. She was too big to hold on to while fighting properly. Even though she'd been just a tiny baby only a little while ago.

Just as I was about to ask her what exactly was going on, the fake Ason said, “Who goes there?”

“Sorry, I’m in the middle of something. Besides, it’s only proper manners to give your name first.”

“I am Ason. The founder of Wa. Kneel and beg for my forgiveness. Or else...”

Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not good to lie? I thought, then said, “Don’t lie to me. I know you’re not Ason. He returned to his original world. You’re a fake.”

He stood there silently.

Come on, say something. I’d been hoping to gauge this being’s intelligence based on his reply. The fact that he hadn’t responded indicated that he wasn’t good at speaking outside of template conversations. Since he wasn’t attacking, I decided to probe a little further.

“Most intelligences born of magic have much of their identity removed to prevent them from turning on their creators. It’s easy enough to tell when you’re talking to an artificial intelligence. You’re not Ason, just someone who’s copied his appearance, mannerisms, and desire to rule the world.”

Still, the fake Ason remained silent.

Seriously, say something already. Is your processing power not good enough for this conversation? No, if it was that weak, it wouldn’t have been able to make this maze. Chances were this fake Ason was an artificial intelligence that hadn’t had much thought put into its social parameters. I suspected I knew what this thing was, and how it had come to be. The real fake Ason was made of sand just like the others, considering how he had the strange uniformity of mana flow that all magic creatures possessed. But he had a much larger mana pool than his clones.

The fake Ason raised his hand, and his destroyed clones started to re-form.

Seeing that, Friede shouted, “D-Dad, look out!”

“Don’t worry. They’re nothing more than puppets. Watch closely, this is how real mages fight.”

The fake nue, the sand snakes, and the fake fake Asons were all just being

controlled by the real fake Ason. In medieval times, people controlled their puppets with strings, and in the modern day, those strings simply transformed into electromagnetic waves. This entire sand maze was one big magical apparatus, and the corridors were circuits. Meaning the metaphorical strings were somewhere in the walls and floors. *Ah, found 'em.*

I set my rifle to semi-auto and pointed it at the floor beneath fake Ason's feet.

"Hrm?!" the real fake Ason exclaimed, as all of his puppets turned to sand. This time they wouldn't be coming back either.

"Huh?! What did you do?!" Friede asked, shocked.

"Remember how in one of my lectures I explained that remotely controlling things with magic requires connecting threads of mana to the object? When you're dealing with a puppet master, it's faster to cut the strings than to take the puppets out one by one."

Without their strings, puppets were harmless. The real fake Ason had been supplying magic to everything, but now he could no longer do that.

"Fool," fake Ason said, then began trying to rebuild his network of strings.

"Not so fast." I switched back to full-auto and blasted away at fake Ason.

But the fake Ason just grinned and said, "Now you've done it."

"Dad?!" Friede shouted while the fake Ason made a few hand motions to cast a spell.

"Suffer for your folly!"

My bullets were reflected by an invisible barrier back at me. Now I was the one about to eat a hail of bullets. But I just raised one hand and activated my vortex.

"I guess you're not as dumb as I thought."

The reflected bullets weren't actually my own—they were copies. But they were just as strong as the originals. Fortunately, I'd spent well over a decade honing my mana-absorbing abilities. Eating up this many bullets would be a piece of cake. The vortex that spawned in front of my hand sucked all the bullets in, yielding their mana to me. If this kept up, though, we'd just be

playing catch with our mana. There'd be no end to it. For now, I decided to keep this deadlock in place. It didn't take much concentration, so I could focus on talking to Friede.

"I met Kite and the others already, but they were in a tight spot, and I didn't have time to ask what's going on. So can you give me the rundown?"

I wasn't expecting as concise a report as Shirin's, but Friede surprised me by keeping it short and to the point.

"That fake Ason is stockpiling mana by using the same magic circle that Wa's capital creates! He's keeping the spell activated by using himself as the mana flow! But Professor Kite said if we completely destroy those four walls, he'll lose all of his stored mana!"

Wow, that was a good explanation. You've grown, Friede, I thought. Then I said, "Thanks, that's all I needed to know."

It made sense. If a thousand people walked down a street, that was the equivalent of 1,000 kites of mana flowing in that direction. If you could control the flow of traffic, you could definitely make a magic circle that was activated by the movements of people. In a way, it worked just like those staircases that lit up whenever someone stepped on a stair. Friede had come here to destroy the lynchpin of the magic circle, and cause the flow to short-circuit. Since the group was low on food and water, they probably needed a reckless plan like this to even stand a chance at getting out.

"Friede."

"Yeah, dad?"

I thought about saying "Leave everything to me," but then I realized there was a better way of doing things.

"What do you want me to do next?" I asked. Friede gave me a stunned look. "Look, you fought as hard as you could until the very end, right? You were doing everything you could to make it back alive. That's how I was able to reach you in time. This isn't like the last time I had to save you. You've grown."

Taking a moment to process what I said, Friede then smiled. "Yeah! In that case, can you take care of the fake Ason for me?!"

“Seriously?” I sighed. *Asking for the impossible right out of the gate, huh? Well, I’m used to orders like that, so just leave it to me.* I asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I’ve gotta finish what I started,” Friede said, pointing to the walls. They were starting to slowly regenerate. If they were fully restored, Fake Ason would be infinitely more of a threat. The fact that he was able to focus on repairing them while fighting us already said a lot about his abilities.

“Got it. You keep smashing the walls while I focus on taking Fake Ason down.”

“I’m counting on you, dad.”

“Gotcha.”

I never imagined the day would come when I would be fighting side by side with my daughter. It was a happy moment for sure. Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to dwell on it since Fake Ason started talking again.

“You mean to impede me, whelp?”

“You’re the one that’s getting in the way of our moment here.”

The fake Ason didn’t respond.

You’ve gotta have at least one comeback, right? You’re like those old one-note chatbots that can only say a couple stock phrases. The fake Ason’s stilted conversational abilities proved that he’d failed to copy more than the surface level of Ason’s personality. Indeed, he seemed quite different from the historical Ason who’d lived a thousand years ago. On top of having barely any lines, the man couldn’t even crack a joke. Then again, someone did say humor was the highest form of wit, so if he couldn’t hold a decent conversation, jokes were far beyond him.

“Now then, how to take you down...”

I could hear my daughter shouting in the distance as she started breaking down the walls again. While she was going strong for now, she wouldn’t be able to absorb mana indefinitely. Unlike Master, Friede and I were mortal. If we took in too much mana at once, it’d destroy our bodies. Despite aiming to take this guy out quickly, I wasn’t sure how to go about it. Also, I wasn’t convinced killing

him would actually be the end of it—nor did I know how much mana was stockpiled in this castle. If I went on the offensive and lost, Friede would die too. I needed to approach this methodically.

Just as I was starting to panic a little, I heard a werewolf howl in the distance. It seemed Fahn and the others were on their way. Probably with Kite and Yuhette and the rest too.

“Veight, that guy has a core!” Kite shouted as the group grew closer. Jerrick was carrying him since he wouldn’t be able to keep up with his human legs. “His personal mana stockpile is around 700 kites! The castle has around 10,000, but it’s not enough to make a Valkaan!”

Kite was covered in dust, but he was grinning. *Nice work. You really are the only man worthy of being my vice-commander.* Kite had been the one who’d given me the intel I needed during the Draulight’s Legacy debacle too.

“Thanks!” Seven hundred kites was a little less than half of what I possessed. The amount stockpiled in the castle didn’t matter so long as Friede kept those walls down, so I should be able to win.

“All right, I’ve thought up a strategy!”

Magical constructs needed mana to move. If Friede could just keep fake Ason from accessing his castle’s reserves, I could wear him down in a simple battle of attrition. Once he ran out of mana, he’d stop moving.

I leapt at the fake Ason, transforming in midair. The rush of strength you felt when transforming was one of the greatest things ever. The fake started drawing in mana from the castle again. The rate of mana flowing into him made it clear that he was trying to use a big spell. I needed to stop him.

“AWOOOOOOOOO!” I let out a howl, disturbing the flow of mana throughout the maze. Soul Shaker came in handy during times like this too. Not only did it interrupt Fake Ason’s channeling, but I could absorb all of the mana that I’d put under my control.

The mana Fake Ason had planned on using for his spell started flowing to me instead. Fake Ason had more money than me, but I had nimble enough fingers to swipe his cash every time he withdrew some from the ATM. In a battle

between mages, the ability to manipulate mana mattered far more than the size of your mana reserves. If you sealed your opponent's ability to use their mana, they couldn't do a thing.

“Hrrrng?!” Fake Ason went on his guard, but he wasn't able to intuit what I was about to do next.



“Did you believe such a meager howl would work here? This is my sanctuary. I am Wa’s eternal king!”

“If you think this is enough to make you a king, then you’re an idiot.” Fake Ason had a lot more mana than me, but his skills as a mage were lacking.

Drunk on power, the fake Ason leisurely brandished his sleeves. “I will expand this sanctuary across the entire continent, and once the barbarian tribes are defeated, I will—huh?”

Oh, did you finally notice I was taking your mana?

“So you can control the flow of power. More than I expected from a beast.”

Looks like it. Fake Ason didn’t seem to have any way of taking back control of the mana, so he started absorbing yet more from the castle. He really wasn’t giving up on whatever spell he wanted to cast. I expanded the range of my vortex and prepared for close combat. Since Fake Ason had 700 kites of mana, he could cause as much damage as 700 mages. I couldn’t leave him alone, or he’d wreak havoc on Wa.

“The age of legends is over. Relics like you need to stay in the past where you belong,” I declared.

Humans and demons were finally living together in peace. People weren’t killing each other over racial or religious differences anymore. We didn’t need any more reincarnators or Heroes coming to mess things up.

Fake Ason furrowed his brow. “You presume yourself stronger than I? You are someone of considerable power. Are you a Hero...no, a Demon Lord?”

“Nope. I’m no Demon Lord.”

“Then what are you?” Fake Ason asked.

I kicked off against the floor and replied, “Just a vice-commander.”

“Man, he really is something else,” Jerrick said in an awed voice as he raised his Blast Rifle. He was guarding Friede while she focused on sucking up all the mana out of the sand walls.

Come to think of it, didn’t Jerrick name his rifle “Big Boss” in honor of dad?

Friede thought to herself. Jerrick had been best friends with Veight since they were kids.

“Hey, Friede. The walls are starting to come back. Isn’t that bad?”

“Huh?!” Friede had let her mind wander for just a second, and the walls had already started reforming. If they fully reformed, Fake Ason would have full access to all the mana in the sand maze again. As Friede once again began sucking the mana out of the walls, Kite used epoch magic to monitor the flow of mana in their surroundings.

“Keep it going, Friede. Fake Ason is trying to manually draw the mana out of the maze without using the function of the magic circle, but with you sucking it all out, he has even less to work with. Vomit the mana you absorb into the air. Veight should be able to repurpose it as long as it’s not locked away in the sand.”

“Did you have to say it that way?”

Dad’s friends are all nice people, but why do they always use such gross wording? Shaking her head, Friede refocused her attention on her father.

Right now, Veight was having a shootout with Fake Ason. Since he could absorb mana, Friede wasn’t worried the bullets would hurt him. However, Fake Ason kept summoning creatures of sand as well, which were more of a threat. Veight was dashing around at blinding speed to take care of them, but every now and again he’d only dodge an attack by a hair’s breadth. In fact, the way he was fighting wasn’t too different from the way Friede had tackled Fake Ason’s creations earlier.

“Is dad gonna be okay...?” she muttered.

“It’s true that Veight’s having trouble,” Kite said in a cheerful tone. “He can’t use his rifle or his claws to tear through Fake Ason, since he’s just made of sand.”

“Th-Then how’s he going to win?”

Kite gave her a reassuring smile. “Through attrition. He’s waiting for Fake Ason to burn through his 700 kites of mana. At which point, he’ll be immobile.”

“WHAT?!” she exclaimed. *That’s way too reckless!*

Chuckling at Friede’s surprise, Kite said, “Don’t worry, Fake Ason’s already gone down to around 560 kites.”

“Fake Ason still has that much left?! If dad messes up a single dodge, he’ll get flattened!”

There were even more sand monsters bearing down on her father now. Although, with how crowded the corridor was, they were occasionally hitting each other in their attempts to get Veight. Friede couldn’t even fathom how he was remaining unscathed through such a ferocious onslaught. But Kite didn’t seem worried in the slightest.

“If Veight moves around too much, it’ll actually be to his detriment. The more inertia he builds, the harder it’ll be for him to suddenly change directions. Plus, he’s protecting himself with strengthening magic, so a hit or two won’t even scratch him.”

“How can you be so calm?! Hey, Jerrick, shouldn’t you go help him?!”

But Jerrick was grinning as well.

“My squad’s not too good at close combat. Though, even Fahn and the Garney bros would probably just get in his way right now.”

“Even Uncle Garbert and Uncle Nibert can’t do anything to help?!”

Garbert and Nibert were the werewolf squad’s two best fighters, and the wrestling instructors for new recruits. If even they wouldn’t last in this melee fight, Friede couldn’t imagine how her father would. Despite this, both Jerrick and Kite were just sitting back and watching with smiles on their faces.

“That wall over there is under a pretty big load right now. I bet smashing it will help Veight out a bit,” Jerrick said, pointing to one of the walls in the distance.

“Sounds good to me. And if you manage to break that wall down, it’ll cause the mana to flow out of this maze even faster. We’ll be able to speed this fight up,” Kite replied.

“Cool, I’ll let the others know.”

The two briskly put their plan into motion, and before long, all of the werewolves were busy bringing down walls. Jerrick used his howls to guide the other werewolves, pinpointing the spots they needed to attack to bring the walls down efficiently. Werewolves were strong enough to collapse the hardened sand walls with just punches and kicks, just not quickly.

“Friede, you help out too. You’ve got the most destructive power out of everyone right now.”

“G-Got it!”

Fake Ason seemed to have realized the other werewolves were a threat as well, and had directed some of his sand creatures to attack them. Fortunately, Kite was keeping an eye on the general flow of mana, and he was able to pick up on the attack before it happened.

“Monza, he’s targeting you guys!”

“Ahaha, got it!” Monza cackled gleefully, and fired a barrage of bullets into the sand snakes coming after her and her squad. Though things were just barely stable for now, Friede couldn’t help but feel like they were still the ones on the back foot.

“Professor, will we really be able to win this?!”

“Yeah, fights where Veight’s involved are always like this.” Kite seemed confused by why Friede was still panicking.

“Wait, you mean you do this all the time?”

“Compared to the Draulight’s Legacy debacle, this is nothing.”

“What? This is nothing?!”

“Yeah, don’t worry. Just focus on your own task. Now that we’ve gotten things this far, Fake Ason doesn’t stand a chance. Sure he’s got a lot of mana left, but at this point, he could hardly kill me, let alone Veight.”

Friede’s eyes widened in shock. *Dad, what kind of crazy stunts did you pull in the past?* Her friends seemed to be thinking the same thing, judging by their expressions. Like her, they too were fighting fiercely and thought they might die at any second.

“Everyone, protect Friede!” Iori shouted.

“I’m trying!” Friede exclaimed. “Joshua, you take the vanguard! Iori, you’re our lookout!”

Iori and the grimalkin kept an eye on the general state of the battlefield, while Yuhette served as a makeshift commander, and Shirin and Joshua went into the thick of the fighting. Friede herself took a few potshots with her pistol as well, using it as an opportunity to vent the excess mana she’d absorbed.

Meanwhile, Veight continued to fight Fake Ason all by himself. The battle between them was so far beyond anything Friede had experienced that she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Someone, please help dad out! And dad, please don’t lose!

I was starting to get bored of this prolonged battle of attrition, but I kept my attention focused as I slowly whittled him down.

“You really think you can kill me with just that?” I taunted, and Fake Ason summoned another score of sand snakes.

Making and commanding those snakes took up a lot of Fake Ason’s mana. And with how many sand creatures were already crowding the corridor, a few more would just get in the way. It was an utter waste of resources. However, with Fake Ason trying to overwhelm us with numbers, I was worried Friede and the others were having a hard time. Sadly, there wasn’t anything I could do even if they were. I had to sit tight here until Fake Ason was completely worn down.

Man, this must be a real boring fight to watch. Reminds me of this one RPG I played way back when, where I kept on killing the final boss’s minions to weaken him over and over until his defense was finally low enough to kill. Meanwhile, Fake Ason looked like he was starting to panic.

“Nnngh?!” fake Ason exclaimed.

He’d summoned too many creatures at once, and thanks to Friede’s demolition work, he couldn’t access the full store of his mana. It didn’t help that he kept wasting his mana on redundant attacks. Of course, if I let my guard down, the swarm of sand creatures would probably bury me. But as long as I

stayed alert, they were too slow to be a threat. Some of them were going after Friede and the others too, so I used Ryuuga to take a few out every now and then. For the most part, though, I focused on keeping myself alive.

Eventually, Fake Ason realized there was only so much support I could give my allies, and he grinned.

“I may be incapable of defeating you...but what of your fellows?”

“They’ll take care of themselves.”

On the surface, it looked like Fake Ason had summoned a sand apocalypse to wipe us all out. But in truth, he was struggling, and kept spamming attacks in the hopes one would land. *I think you’ll be too busy keeping yourself alive to focus too much on them anyway.*

So far, he hadn’t actually done any damage to any of us. Meanwhile, Friede and the others had wrecked his castle while I kept him busy. Fake Ason’s only hope was to abandon his assault on me, and have all of his sand creatures attack Friede and the others. But if he did that, he’d be leaving himself wide open to me. He’d seen me absorb mana, so he knew that if I got close to him, it’d be game over. This was the fatal weakness all creatures made of magic had.

Fake Ason kept on summoning more sand creatures while also firing off mana bullets at me in an attempt to rattle me. Unfortunately, it wasn’t working. After a few minutes, he stopped summoning any more creatures. Then a few minutes later, the number of remaining creatures began to drop. Not because I was killing them, but because he no longer had the mana to keep them moving.

“Curses...”

Fake Ason was clearly faltering, but if I gave him any room to breathe, he’d recover, so I couldn’t let up on the pressure just yet. The sand nue were the first to collapse, and before long, the sand snakes started crumbling as well.

Finally, the long battle of attrition ended, and Fake Ason was left all by himself.

“Uncle, the walls have stopped regenerating! According to Professor Kite, Fake Ason has less than 100 kites of mana left!” Shirin shouted as he ran over. It seemed he’d been appointed the other group’s messenger. And from the sound

of it, they'd taken care of things on their end.

"Gotcha," I replied, grinning. *Guess I better finish up as well.*

At long last, I moved on the offensive. Dashing forward, I grabbed Fake Ason's arms and pinned them behind his back. I thought he'd be a slender man, since I assumed the real Ason had been more of a politician than a warrior. But surprisingly, Fake Ason had quite a bit of muscle.

"How dare you, impudent whelp!"

Come on, I'm not the one who's a bootleg Ason here. Once I had Fake Ason pinned, I started sucking out his mana.

"Take *this!*"

"No! Cease! Cease, I say!" Fake Ason struggled to break free, but despite his muscles, he didn't seem to have any close-combat experience.

I bet the real Ason would have put up a better fight. Ignoring his pleas, I kept draining Fake Ason dry.

"Ngh... Gaaaaah...ooooooh..."

Soon enough, his body turned brown, and he crumbled into a pile of sand. A gust of wind blew past, scattering his remains along with the rest of the sand in this castle. *Thanks for the mana.*

Kite, my werewolves, Friede, and her friends all gathered around me.

In a hesitant voice, Friede asked, "Did you...get him?"

"Sure did." I smiled and patted Friede's head. "You did great. But I have to ask, what were you even doing here?"

"It's a long story. But you're sure we're safe now, right? No more fake Asons are going to pop up, yeah?"

You're such a worrywart, Friede. I wonder who you get it from.

"Kite explained it to you, remember? This guy was the center of the whole system." I stuck my hand into the pile of sand in front of me and pulled the core out. "Look, this was his core."

"Isn't that..." Everyone stared at the object in my right hand. "Isn't that just a

jar lid?!”

“*That’s Fake Ason’s true form?!*”

“A blasted jar lid nearly killed us?!”

I get why you guys are mad, but this kind of stuff happens all the time with magic. I handed the jar lid to Kite, and he nodded as he examined it.

“I see, yes. This is the lid to Ason’s Legendary Treasure. The design matches, and it’s exactly the right size. I remember the measurements I took perfectly.”

Man, now I really wanna know how this fake Ason came to be.

“So that’s it then, right, Kite?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s all over now. But I’ll seal off part of the magic circle on this lid just in case.” Kite flipped the lid around and painted over part of the magic circle with a red paste. With that, the lid was no longer functional.

“All right. Good to go. Let’s take this back so we can study it properly.”

“Okay. We’ll need to report all this to the Chrysanthemum Court too,” I muttered, then turned to Iori. “I was hoping Meraldia could monopolize this relic, but with Lord Tokitaka’s daughter here, we can’t exactly keep this secret. You did well to come here, Lady Iori.”

“Th-Thank you...” Iori stammered, and bowed.

I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on, but if Iori was here, it was probably on Heavenwatchers business. Although, it was always possible she was here against orders. In which case, she definitely needed to bring back something to show for her insubordination, or she’d get grilled by her superiors. Either way, I needed to navigate this in a way that she came out on top. Any friend of my daughter’s was a friend of mine.

“Now then...” I turned back to everyone else. “With the entire balance of mana thrown out of whack, this whole maze is going to collapse soon. Let’s get out of here before we get buried alive.”

“Yes, sir!”

It turned out I'd misjudged just how fast the maze was going to collapse, and we almost really did get buried alive. At any rate, we now knew that a magical creature pretending to be Ason had been stockpiling mana in the desert—probably to do something detrimental to humanity as a whole. Reports were sent out to both Meraldia and Wa about what we'd found, and I decided to travel to Wa to directly explain the situation to the Chrysanthemum Court. Naturally, Friede came with me. I would have taken her regardless, but my beloved Demon Lord had even ordered me to look after her.

"Isn't this the whole 'mixing of private and public affairs' thing that you keep saying is really bad?" Friede asked as we headed towards Wa.

"Yes, but your mom's prone to worrying, so let her have this," I replied. *I am too, honestly.* Besides, I still needed to ask Tokitaka about how Friede and the others had been in Wa, so I would've needed to head back to the capital either way.

We made it back without incident, and were ushered into a waiting room in the Chrysanthemum Court's hall while Tokitaka was summoned. As the head of the Heavenwatchers, Tokitaka had a lot of diplomatic responsibilities, which was why he was the one we always met with. He came soon enough, but to my surprise, his daughter was with him.

"It has been far too long, Lord Veight."

"It certainly has. I'm glad you're doing well, Lord Tokitaka."

Tokitaka smoothed his graying hair and gave me a wan smile.

"Unfortunately, my age has been catching up to me," he said. "I can no longer beat the young blood in Gusokujutsu sparring matches. As the chief of the Heavenwatchers, I'm supposed to set an example for the others, but..."

Honestly, I was surprised that he was still able to spar with anyone at all at his age. *I guess the rumors about him being quite active for his age were true.* I turned to Iori and greeted her as well.

"Lady Iori, I heard you rescued our exchange students from quite a predicament. As the vice-commander of Meraldia's Demon Lord, I formally offer you my gratitude."

Flustered, lori blushed and bowed to me. “I-I-It was nothing!”

She waved her arms wildly in front of her, seemingly unable to get any more words out. *Sorry, I’m too old to know how to properly interact with kids these days.* I scratched my head awkwardly and Tokitaka took over for her.

“My apologies. There was something she wanted to ask of you, which was why I brought her along.”

“Oh, and what’s that?” I asked.

I’d heard a lot about lori from Friede, and I doubted lori was the kind of girl who would ask for a reward.

“While I cannot abuse my position to help you, I do owe you a debt for helping my daughter, Lady lori. If it’s within my power to grant your request, I will.”

“I, umm... I...” lori waffled about nervously for a few seconds, then steeled her resolve and said in a firm voice, “I want to go to Meraldia!”

“You *what?!* ” Friede exclaimed in surprise, her jaw dropping open. Now that she’d finally gotten it out, lori seemed to have calmed down, and she went respectfully down on one knee.

“I want to learn together with Friede! Please allow me to become Lady Fumino’s disciple, and go to Meraldia with you!”

“We have no reason to refuse you entry to Meraldia, so that shouldn’t be a problem at all. But...I guess this has become more of a personal meeting than an official one at this point, huh?” In an attempt to get lori to stop being so formal, I said in a gentle tone, “I will say, you seem to be quite taken with my daughter.”

“Yes! I respect Friede from the bottom of my heart! I’m sure she’ll be of great value to both Meraldia and Wa!”

“Wait, hang on, you think way too highly of me! I’m not that amazing!” Friede shouted, flustered.

Man, this brings back memories. Like father, like daughter, I guess. I held out a hand to stop Friede, then asked, “I’m glad you hold my daughter in such high

esteem. But I have to ask, what's wrong with simply studying in Wa?"

Tokitaka let out a deep sigh and explained in Iori's stead. "She got me good when I asked her that. 'The Heavenwatchers is an organization that gathers intelligence on foreign nations, so wouldn't it make sense for the group's successor to visit other countries?' is what she said."

I had always had a sneaking suspicion that Tokitaka was soft when it came to his daughter, but now I knew it for a fact.

Noticing my gaze, Tokitaka cleared his throat awkwardly and said, "Furthermore...Fumino is one of our best operatives, and she already has quite a few people working under her. I think she'd make for a good mentor for Iori."

"Aren't you worried about sending your daughter abroad though?"

Tokitaka frowned at me. "Like you're one to talk. You keep sending your own daughter abroad, don't you?"

Look, I'm allowing her freedom, but that doesn't mean I'm not worried still!

Before I could reply, Tokitaka gave me a small smile and added, "You and Friede are quite alike, you know that? She keeps poaching other nations' best talent."

Excuse me, I never poached anyone. Even Fumino still works for you. Though, I guess it is my fault she's stationed in Meraldia...

Again, before I could argue, Tokitaka bowed deeply and said, "Please take care of my daughter while she's in Meraldia."

At this point, it would just be rude to keep asking if Tokitaka was sure about sending his daughter off, so I simply nodded and said, "Of course. I'll keep her safe, you have my word."

And thus, Iori became another one of the exchange students studying at Meraldia University. She would study espionage and diplomacy from Fumino, but otherwise, she'd take the same courses any other student would. Judging by how intelligent Iori was, I suspected she'd grow into quite the leader once she graduated.

After that was settled, Tokitaka and I talked about letting the runaway ninja

grimalkin that Friede had rescued join the demon army. *I guess I do end up poaching a lot of talent, huh?*

Once Friede and Iori had left the room, I told Tokitaka what Master's theory was regarding the fake Ason.

"I think the magical creature we fought in that maze was the control system for Ason's Legendary Treasure."

From what I could tell, the mages who'd designed the Valkaan-creating artifacts had all put an artificial intelligence into most of their relics to maintain them. Those were the ones that caused the most trouble for us.

"I suspect Ason discovered this artifact when he was exploring the Windswept Dunes. He correctly assumed it was dangerous and didn't bring it back to Wa."

"Lord Ason was a wise individual after all," Tokitaka said with a smile. Like most citizens of Wa, he was proud of his founder.

"Yes," I replied with a nod. "However, when he realized the lid had sentience, things got a lot more complicated. This is my personal conjecture and not Demon Empress Gomoviroa's, but..." I cleared my throat. "I believe Ason tricked the AI in the lid, and succeeded in spiriting away the rest of the jar."

"Tricked how?"

"The maze the fake Ason had built was identical to the layout of Wa's capital. Ason must have taught that particular formation to the AI. He'd probably said this was the most efficient way to gather mana or something."

Tokitaka looked surprised, but from what we'd recovered from the conversation log of the lid, that did seem like a plausible explanation.

Confused, Tokitaka asked, "But the effects of the capital's magic circle only work with a lot of people moving through it, right?"

"Correct. Which was why Fake Ason wasn't able to do anything with an empty city. Eventually, Fake Ason realized this and started using himself to push the flow of mana."

It reminded me of how in folklore, the clever human always tricked the

demon, demigod, or what have you.

Grinning, I added, “But that wasn’t nearly efficient enough. As a result, even a thousand years later, Fake Ason didn’t have enough mana to make a Valkaan. On top of that, the maze was a terrible storage medium, and mana leaked out of it into the surrounding desert. After all, that specific magic circle is meant to be a defensive measure that expels stored mana outward to decimate invaders.”

In the end, Ason had managed to prevent the creation of another Valkaan, but unfortunately the mana that leaked out had given birth to the giant sandworms. Similarly, the main vessel of the treasure had warped one of the grimalkin into a nue.

“Sadly, Ason wasn’t a mage himself, so he hadn’t been able to stop the artifact.”

Hence why he’d entrusted it to the grimalkin. However, what I didn’t get was why he’d gone missing after that. To the end, he’d been a man of mystery.

Tokitaka folded his arms and closed his eyes. After a few seconds, he said, “I suppose this means you finished the job Lord Ason started... I wonder if it’s fate that things turned out this way. The land of the divine really does produce nothing but geniuses.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” That said, with this, all of the questions surrounding Ason’s Legendary Treasure had finally been answered. “We still aren’t done investigating the Windswept Dunes though. For all we know, there might be other relics hidden away in the desert. It’s only after getting rid of them all that the desert will revert to being a fertile plain.”

Tokitaka nodded in agreement. “The future looks bright at least. We should probably hash out boundaries now so there aren’t land disputes later down the line.”

“Definitely.”

I’d had enough war for a lifetime.

After my meeting with Tokitaka was over, I went to go see the Great Torii of

the Divine. He'd gotten permission from the Chrysanthemum Court for me and Master to examine it. Granted, this time, it was Master doing most of the examining.

"My word, the more I discover about it, the more mysterious it becomes," Master mused as she looked over the gate with sparkling eyes. "Even its physical construction is exceptional. While it appears to be simple sedimentary rock, there are three-dimensional magic circles imbued within the pillars holding it up. This would only be possible if you constructed the gate layer by layer."

"Yeah, you can shape igneous rock easier, but with sedimentary rock, you would have had to build it bit by bit..." I said. *How on earth did they manage that? Did the civilization that made this have 3D printers or something?*

Master couldn't seem to figure out how they'd constructed it either, and she cocked her head to one side.

"With our current technology, it would take billions of years to craft something like this. But beyond that, I cannot fathom what kind of intellect it would require to devise a magic circle like this in the first place."

It was hard enough for people to create two-dimensional magic circles. Adding an extra dimension would make properly connecting all the circuits nigh impossible.

"Back in my old world, people used computers for these kinds of calculations. Since a computer can brute force a ton of combinations at once, and spit out the best answer."

"Hmm, a method like that would potentially allow for the creation of three-dimensional magic circles. However, that only further proves that this strange construct is something beyond mere human intelligence."

If even a thousand-year-old great sage thought this wasn't possible with the technology of this world, it probably was some kind of alien artifact. Reincarnation itself fell under the purview of necromancy in this world. Master knew more about reincarnation than anyone alive, and even she couldn't analyze this gate. However, there were a few things she'd been able to learn from it still. Including one thing that was gnawing at me.

“Master... You’re certain that Ason used this gate to go back to his old world?”

Apparently, this artifact not only had the power to link worlds, but also kept a log of sorts of when and how it had been used. It had taken the combined efforts of Master’s best pupils to figure it out, but she had made some groundbreaking discoveries.

“Indeed. Most of the logs record people coming to this world, but there is just one recorded instance of a person using it to return from whence they came. Judging by the time signature here, Ason is the only person I can think of who would have used it.”

Ason had been the very first person to get transported to this world, and he became the founder of Wa. From what I could tell, he’d been a noble during the Heian period, and had used the title nobles were referred to back then—ason—as his actual name here. Considering how beloved he was in Wa, he’d likely been a wise, kind individual. Other than that, though, we knew almost nothing about him. The only other thing I’d been able to figure out was he’d been a fan of onmyouji and feng shui, but that was about it.

“With how he is described, I fail to understand why he would simply return home given the problem of Ason’s Legendary Treasure remained unresolved, however...” Master trailed off.

“I agree. Maybe he returned home in the hopes of finding a solution?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. We have no way of knowing. Making assumptions when the knowledge we need is forever out of our grasp only leads to mistakes.”

Master always told me that a true researcher always needed the courage to accept when something was unknowable.

“What I can surmise is that neither Ason’s body nor his soul reside in this world. I hope he was able to return home and find happiness,” she said.

“There are a lot of stories in my world about people going to different worlds and coming back. Maybe he was one of the few who really did do that.” Japanese mythology was full of stories like that, such as Urashima Tarou, Ono

no Takamura, and so on.



Master pressed herself against one of the pillars holding up the gate, and tried to analyze the inside of the walls. After a few minutes, she nodded in satisfaction, and sat down on the stool one of the servants had brought over for her.

She then turned to me and said with a serious expression, “This gate contains all information required to call the bodies and souls of people from other worlds embedded into it. Including the coordinates of the worlds it’s pulling from.”

“Wait...you mean...”

“Yes, this has instructions on how to reach your world.” Master gazed off into the distance, smiling slightly. “Well? Are you interested in returning home?”

“Nope, not one bit.”

“Why so?”

I’d already made my peace with my new life here ages ago.

“It’s been almost forty years since I came to this world. Assuming time passes at relatively the same rate, that means it’s been forty years back on Earth too.”

There was also no guarantee I’d been reincarnated immediately after dying—plus I was a werewolf now, not a human. I was a different person now, down to my genetic code, so there really wasn’t anything connecting me to Earth anymore.

However, Master seemed unconvinced, and she asked in a serious tone, “I’m certain your world has ways for you to ascertain what transpired among those you knew after you’d died. Do you truly not care about finding out?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I don’t care...”

Regardless of what had happened back home, I had no interest in returning. I’d already devastated my parents by dying before them; I didn’t want to suddenly pop back into their lives and make things more confusing. Assuming they were still alive, even.

“Besides, if I took the journey back home, Master, would I be able to come back here safely?”

Master poked her finger into one of the many cracks in the gate.

“If we could restore this artifact, theoretically, you could be summoned back without issue. However, there’s no precedent for this...”

See, we’ve got problems already. Honestly, I’d had a good enough life back on Earth, and I’d died without regrets. Master seemed a little reluctant to just let things go, but eventually, she tapped her shoulder with her staff, and shook her head.

“Well, I suppose this really is for the best. I do wish to study this other world you came from, but it’s not worth putting my beloved disciple in danger.”

“Wait, you wanted to send me back for your own research? Not because you were worried I might have lingering attachments?”

“Well, of course. What kind of scientist would I be if I wasn’t interested in testing such a marvelous device?”

Okay, fair. If I was in your position, I’d definitely want to power this thing back up.

Master steeped her fingers together and added, “I would have very much liked to go to your world and partake in these ‘haunted houses’ and ‘zombie movies’ you’ve told me about.”

If a necromancer like Master suddenly popped up in my world, there’d definitely be a stir. But at the same time, I really wanted to see Master stuffing her face full of popcorn while she watched a zombie flick.

Smiling, I shook my head. “Even if I wanted to go back, I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m pretty sure this device can mess with the past and the future of this world.”

“Ah, you mean that person who came to this world approximately the same time you did.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure they came after me, but there are no records of them anywhere.”

During that final attempt, the summoning ritual had succeeded, but the Chrysanthemum Court hadn’t been able to find a reincarnator anywhere.

Afterwards, Wa's mages had conducted an investigation and concluded that the reincarnator had been sent to either the past or the future. Moreover, one of the mages who had been present during the summoning vanished completely from everyone's memories. The ritual required eight people, but after it was performed, only seven remained—and no one could recall who the final member was. My guess was that the reincarnator had been sent to the past, and whatever they'd done had erased the final member's family line. In other words, history had been rewritten.

"If only the future was solely affected by this gate, it would not be as much of an issue. However, if it can alter the past, it certainly is far too dangerous," Master muttered.

"I'd say so, since we won't even notice the past has been changed. I think it would be best if this gate remains here undisturbed until the end of time."

Granted, there probably wasn't even anyone who could fix it—but just in case, it was better to keep it hidden away. I had Master cast a few protective wards over it too, so that no one else would be able to tamper with the device.

"Mmm, that should do it. Breaking this ward would require the kind of processing power only those 'computers' of your old world possessed. At the very least, no regular person will be able to dispel it."

"Then I guess for now we're safe," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. "That aside, I wonder who the reincarnator that got sent to the past even was. Personally, I'd put my money on it being Draulight, the gladiator who led the slaves out of Rolmund."

The museum in Draulight, in northern Meraldia, had metal carabiners and crampons on display which had supposedly belonged to Draulight himself. It made no sense for anyone but a modern reincarnator to create things like that—especially since back then, no one in recorded history had scaled the snowy mountains of Rolmund, or had known much about mountain climbing.

Master nodded in agreement. "Yes, that sounds plausible. As such, his reincarnation greatly altered the course of history. Without Draulight, the Meraldian Federation would never have been born, and Rolmund's republic system would not have collapsed as soon as it did."

In that case, the founder of the Schwerin dynasty would have lived out his life as just another noble instead of an emperor. Rolmund, Meraldia, and even Wa's history would be radically different then. Had Draulight actually reincarnated in Wa as initially intended, Wa might have already modernized by now. Because Wa was a small nation flanked by desert on one side and an ocean on the other, they would have naturally tended towards adopting imperialist policies, and turning far-flung nations into vassal colonies. It'd be hard to imagine what the world would look like then. But I was relatively certain it would be a lot less peaceful than it was now.

Sighing again, I said, "Let's stop shaking up this world by bringing over reincarnators. We can handle ourselves just fine even without their knowledge."

"True. This continent is finally at peace, and every nation is progressing at a steady pace. We no longer need legendary figures to carve open the future for us."

"Exactly, Master." From here on out, it would be the common man who built the future. "Man, I hope Friede grows up soon so she can take part in creating our future."

"You simply want to retire, don't you?"

"Well, yeah. But as a parent, I also do expect great things from her. And not just her, but the rest of the new generation as well."

Master clapped her hands, as if just remembering something. "Ah, that reminds me. I must start looking into who the next Demon Lord shall be. Airia has served well in the position, but she must be growing tired of shouldering the burden of responsibility."

"That's true. She can't move around freely as long as she's the Demon Lord, so there's a bunch of stuff we can't do even if we want to. By the way, who were you thinking of appointing as her successor?"

"I was going to choose whoever you recommend."

Seriously? I immediately thought. "Since you're technically the head of our organization, Master, you should be the one to choose our next Demon Lord."

“Perhaps, but I know very little regarding politics.”

“It’s not like I do either...” I trailed off. *Guess we’ll have to ask the council... No wait, they’re gonna argue about it forever.*

There were probably no other humans who wanted to serve as Demon Lord, and the councilors would almost certainly want one of their own to make things easier for them. Master seemed to have realized how much of a hassle picking the right person would be as well, and she sidled closer to me.

“Come now, Veight, will you not help your poor, old master out? You’ve served under three Demon Lords now. Surely you have some inclination of who should be chosen.”

The way she said it made it sound like I was the real arbiter of power here. Unfortunately, I could never say no to a request from Master, so I told her about the potential candidates I’d been considering.

“Well...Ryuunie seems like the best option right now.”

“Oho.” Master grinned. “One who is neither Meraldian nor a demon. However, his martial prowess is lacking. I suspect the demon generals may not approve of him.”

“That’s exactly why I think it should be him,” I said. “You said it yourself, Master—anyone should be allowed to be our Demon Lord. If anyone complains, I’ll get them back in line.”

I didn’t want to make Demon Lord a hereditary position, nor did I want it to be a title that required military accomplishments. Anyone who was willing to devote themselves to the bettering of Meraldia should be allowed to be Demon Lord—no matter where they were born, or how strong they were. I wanted to set a precedent for that while I was still alive.

“Ryuunie lost his father to rebellion, and he’s lived in exile since. But despite the hardships he’s suffered, he holds no grudges, and lives an upstanding life. Both Meraldians and immigrants from Rolmund look up to him, and he’s one of the best politicians I know.”

Had I been in Ryuunie’s position, I might have dedicated my entire life to getting revenge on Eleora. But Ryuunie had easily given up on thoughts of

revenge and focused on doing what he could in Meraldia, together with Woroy. He was definitely someone I could entrust the position of Demon Lord to.

“If anything, I think it’s the Rolmund Empire who won’t look fondly on me appointing someone they exiled as a traitor to the position of Meraldia’s Demon Lord. But I’ll just go to Rolmund myself and explain the situation, so they don’t get agitated.”

“Hmph. I can tell by the look on your face that you’re planning something nefarious again.”

Damn, busted. Right now, Eleora was struggling to keep her empire united, and the facade of an external threat would help bolster that unity. If I spread tales that an exiled prince who bears a grudge against Rolmund had become the next Demon Lord, Eleora would be able to use that to strengthen her own rule. Then we’d just have to put on a big show of slowly de-escalating tensions, and we’d be back to our cordial relationship. Eleora would be able to take credit for that as well, further cementing her own position. It was a masterful plan, if I did say so myself.

Master smirked and said, “You truly do look like a villain whenever you’re scheming something. Whatever happened to the innocent, wide-eyed boy I took in all those years ago?”

Sorry, but it’s because of you that I ended up as the nefarious Demon Lord’s Vice-Commander, you know.

As we wrapped up our investigation of the gate, Friede and Iori came over.

“Dad, are you done with work?”

“I am, but Master doesn’t look like she’s going to leave anytime soon, so I’m just twiddling my thumbs,” I said with an exaggerated sigh, and Master pouted at me.

“You were just as excited as I was!”

“All right, I’ll give you that, but it really is getting late. We should go.” I turned back to Friede. “You did exceptionally well this time around, Friede. I never would have imagined a place like that existed in the Windswept Dunes.”

“Ehehe.”

This is no laughing matter. Do you have any idea how worried I—well, I guess I’m really not one to talk. Besides, they do always say that a good kid worries their parents at least a little. I decided not to voice my worries and instead said, “By the way, there’s something I wanted to ask you, Friede.”

“What is it?” Sensing the slight shift in my tone, Friede stiffened up a little.

Impressed by how much more perceptive she’d gotten, I asked in a serious voice, “What would you have done if you hadn’t been able to break the walls in fake Ason’s maze?”

This was a very important question. Every plan was fallible, no matter how airtight it seemed. And someone who didn’t consider their next move if their plans failed wasn’t fit to lead. In that respect, I didn’t make for a good leader at all.

Still a little nervous, Friede nevertheless immediately answered, “If I couldn’t have done it...I would have joined up with you, dad.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Then I would have fought together with you to help everyone escape. I can’t think of anything else that would have gotten all of us out alive.”

I’m not sure such a half-assed plan B is really a good idea...

Before I could say that though, lori added, “Together, I’m sure the two of you could have overcome any foe, no matter how powerful. I think Friede made the right decision.”

Wow, lori’s totally smitten with you, Friede. I was honestly a little worried. That kind of devotion couldn’t be healthy. While lori’s words of defense didn’t actually do anything to help, I did have to admit Friede had considered a backup plan of sorts. *I guess it’s good enough.*

“I see. That’s not the greatest backup plan, but I’m impressed you were considering what to do in case you failed. Make sure you always keep the possibility of failure in the back of your mind.”

“Okay!”

That wasn't as reassuring as I was hoping for, but considering Friede's age, it was a lot better than it could be. Besides, there were plenty of fully grown adult generals in the demon army who weren't half as reliable as Friede.

"I'm thinking it might be okay to entrust bigger jobs to you."

"Wait, what? Does that mean you're going to let me work for the Commonwealth Council?"

"If there's anything else you'd rather do, you're free to pursue your dreams. You can be a merchant, a battleball player, or an actor even if that's what you want. It's entirely up to you."

"Well, if you are letting me join the council, I think I wanna work there for a bit...since it's where you work too."

You make it sound like you're just going to work in your dad's office as a temp, but this is the nation's ruling council, you know? Eh, whatever. I basically joined the demon army on a whim too.

"All right, then. I'll get the paperwork sorted once we're home. You'll get a proper salary, but you're gonna have to help me out with my job from now on."

"Yessir! Oh, but can you hire lori too?"

"Sure, why not."

Once lori entered the university as a student, I could probably hire her as an intern or something. The chain of command would be a bit weird, but we could probably figure it out.

"I'll do my best at my new job!" Friede said, excited by the prospect.

"Yeah, I'll be counting on you."

Working together with my daughter sounded like fun. While I hadn't hated my previous life, this one was definitely a much more fulfilling one.

"Come on, let's get moving. Your mom's probably getting lonely, so let's hurry home!"

"Okay!" Friede replied with a smile.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone! And sorry for the wait. How are you all doing?

My life's changed quite a bit since the last book. For one thing, I changed publishers. When I heard my amazing editor was retiring, I thought I was done for—but it turns out, he was just moving companies. And in the end, I was able to move over to Square Enix and continue writing *Der Werwolf* under one of their labels. Most of the other staff I'm working with have also stayed the same, which helped a lot with the transition. Tejima-sensei is still taking care of the illustrations, and my designer and proofreader are still on board. I've changed publishers, but my writing environment is basically unchanged. I'm really thankful to everyone for sticking with me through it all.

But unlike the volumes up until now, everything from volume 14 onwards is going to be new content not in the web novel. Also, I've been thinking a lot about how to handle the transition of making Friede the protagonist. Unless I do it right, she'll always be stuck as being "the protagonist's daughter." She'll never become a main character in her own right.

Of course, I need to do this while also keeping Veight's own story going, and it took me a long time to find a balance that satisfied me for this volume. Hopefully you readers also found the balance to be acceptable. If not, I'm sorry, this is the best I can do. At any rate, my own hang-ups meant I put a lot more strain on my lord and savior Fusanon than usual. I'm eternally grateful that he waited patiently for me to hand him the manuscript, and never once tried to rush me. I'm not sure I would have made it without his continued support. And I'd also like to thank my illustrator Tejima-sensei for drawing such wonderful illustrations of teenage Friede and Iori. The way he draws the characters is truly wonderful.

On a side note, my two daughters are growing up quite nicely as well (bragging time).

Friede is fifteen in the story now, but my eldest daughter, who served as the

model for young Friede, is still only seven. She's also nothing like Friede in terms of personality. My daughter is quiet, reserved, and a pretty good artist. There actually isn't any character like her in *Der Werwolf* yet. Maybe I'll use her as the basis for one of the new characters in future volumes but...well, I'll think about it when it's time. My second daughter is three, and she's a lot more energetic. She's still young though, and her personality's still developing, so who knows how she'll turn out. Hopefully, she becomes someone I can base new characters off of too.

It'd be nice if my daughters read this series when they grow up, and realize what kinds of thoughts were running through my head when they were younger... But, really, I don't care too much, and I just want to make sure they can live the kinds of lives they want to.

I remember taking a pedagogy class once, and learning that a good parent-child relationship is the first step to making sure your child learns how to interact with others. I'm pretty sure the class mentioned that parents need to be a safe haven their child can always come back to when necessary. (I learned all this over twenty years ago, so my memories are a bit hazy.) Anyway, it's only because children have a safe place they can return to that they're able to leave the nest in the first place. Friede's at that point in her life where she'll be striking out on her own soon. I'll do my best to write a story where she gets to live a happy and fulfilling life. Though...I am a little worried since these aren't the kinds of stories I normally write...

At any rate, look forward to seeing Friede and Veight go on new adventures in volume 15 (which will hopefully come out).

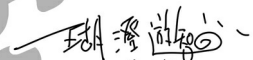
Lastly, my series *The Bastard Tactician's War* is going to be published in April by Kadokawa under the title *The Remote Frontier Noble's Struggles: I Have to Take Care of My Adorable Younger Siblings, So I'll Remove All Obstacles in My Path with the Powers a Witch Granted Me!* There are a lot of additions from the web novel version, so if you're a fan of that, definitely check the light novel out as well.





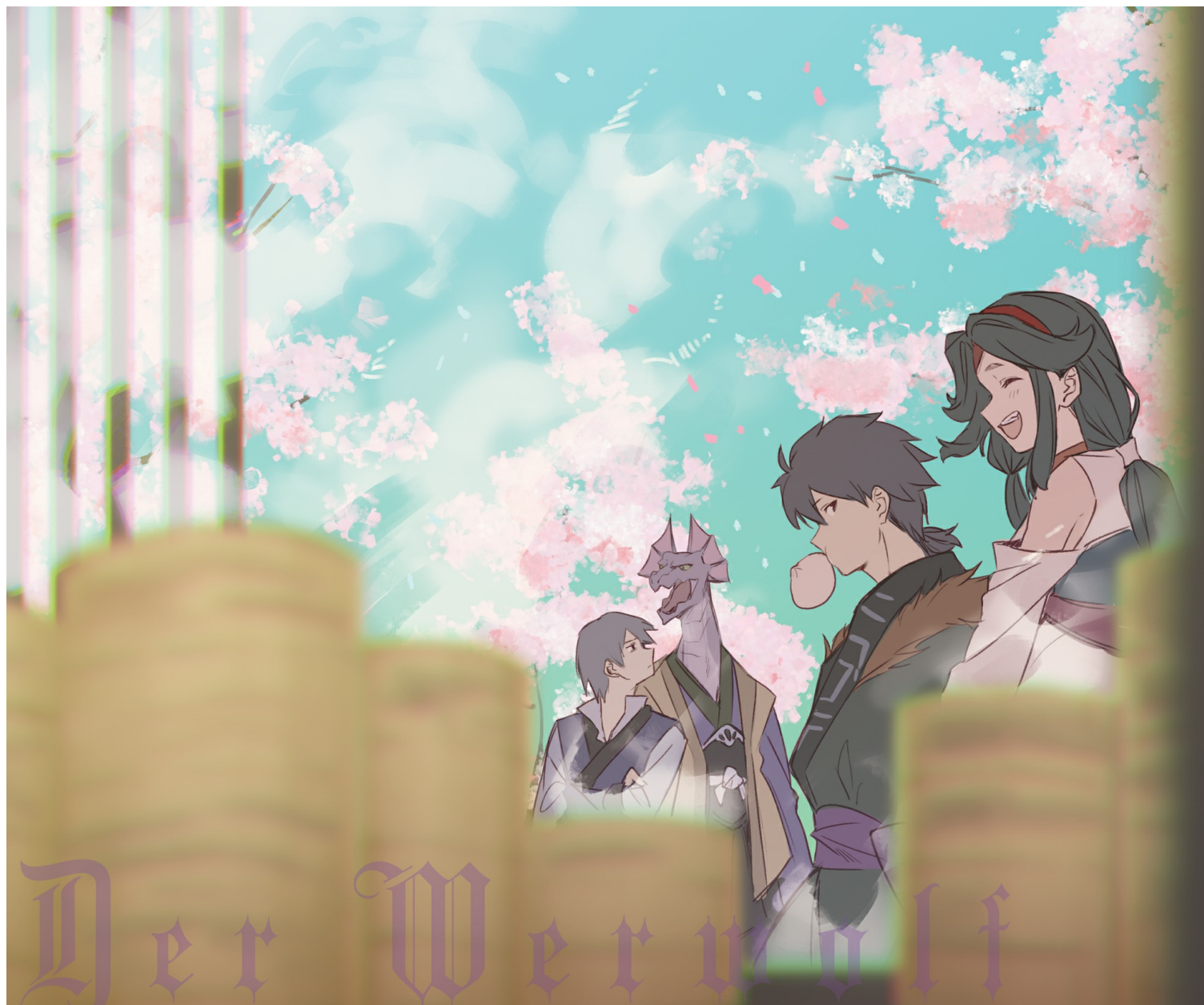
Congratulations on the
release of a new volume!

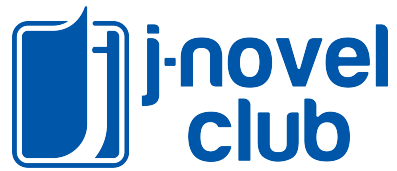
Thanks for reaching out to me even after changing publishers!


Kosumi Junichi

Der Werwolf







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Der Werwolf: The Annals of Veight Volume 14

by Hyougetsu

Translated by Ningen Edited by Meiru

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JINRO E NO TENSEI, MAO NO FUKUKAN vol.14

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